



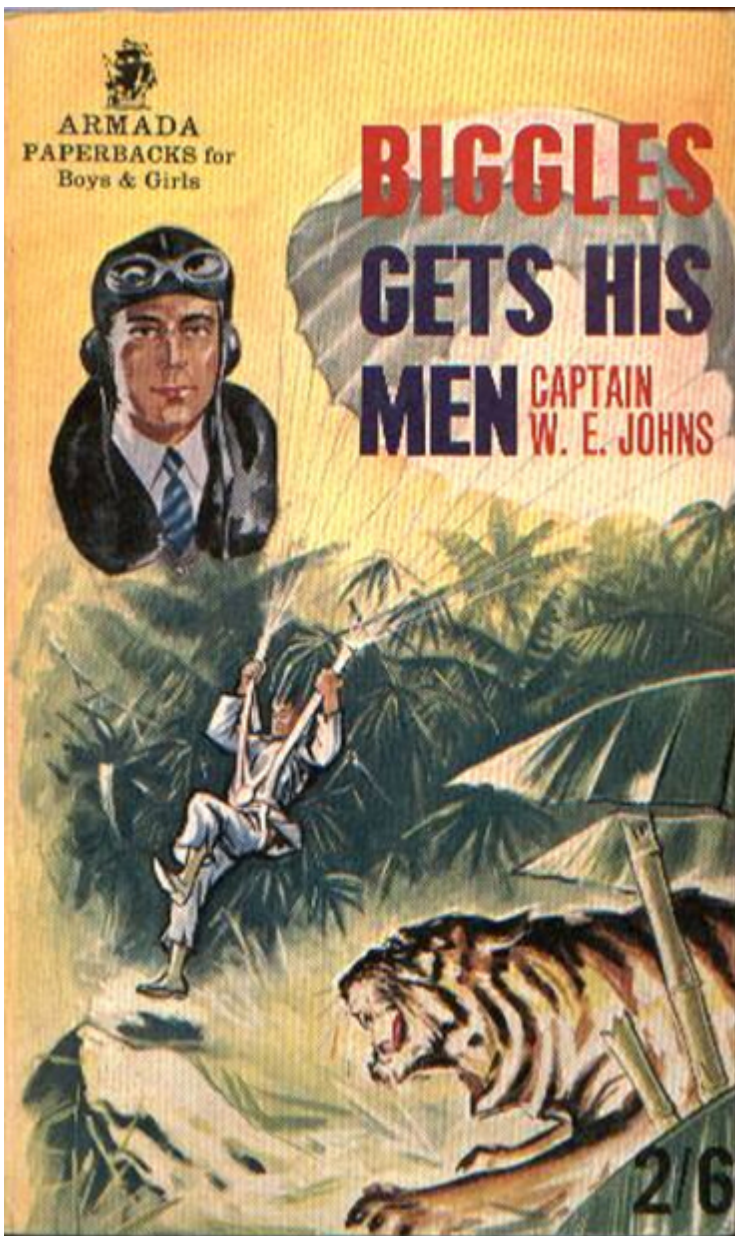
ARMADA  
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Boys & Girls

# BIGGLES GETS HIS MEN

CAPTAIN  
W. E. JOHNS



2/6



## RAYMOND STATES THE CASE

FOR some time the only sound heard in the drab headquarters of the Special Air Service, New Scotland Yard, was the sombre ticking of a white-faced clock as it numbered the seconds with dreary monotony and dropped them into the past. Sergeant Bigglesworth, one time Squadron-Leader Bigglesworth, D.S.O., R.A.F., better known as

"Biggles", leaned back in a tilted chair reading the current issue of

Flight. Air-Constable

"Ginger" Hebblethwaite, hands in pockets, stared moodily across the depressing panorama of wet roofs which the window overlooked. Air-Constables Algy Lacey and Bertie Lissie, in attitudes of bored indifference, idly turned the pages of the daily papers.

At length Ginger yawned audibly, and turning, remarked: "You know, this place gets more and more like a dentist's waiting-room."

No one answered.

Ginger tried another angle. Looking at his chief, he inquired: "Have you no idea at all of what's in the wind?"

"None whatever," answered Biggles, without looking up. "But," he added as an afterthought, "if Air-Commodore Raymond's face is anything to go by it's something unusually grim."

"He's had something on his mind for a week," put in Algy. "I've met him two or three times and he couldn't even say good morning. In fact, I don't think he noticed me."

"There have been a lot of people in and out of his office," volunteered Bertie. "Foreign Office messengers and official-looking blokes with their little black bags, and all that sort of thing—if you see what I mean?"

Biggles closed his magazine, tossed it on the desk and looked at his watch. "Well, I fancy we shall soon know what it's all about," he averred. "

My orders were to report to the conference-room at eleven o'clock. It's nearly that now."

"What about us?" inquired Ginger.

"The Air-Commodore said I'd better take you down as it would save me the trouble of telling you all about it afterwards," replied Biggles, stubbing his cigarette in the ashtray.

"We may as well be drifting along." He got up, and leaving the others to follow went out into the corridor.

After a walk of some distance he stopped before a door conspicuously marked Private, and knocked. A voice called, "Come in." Followed by

the others, he obeyed.

There were five men in the long, plainly furnished room, standing together by the fireplace talking in low tones. One was Air-Commodore Raymond, Assistant-Commissioner of Police, and official head of the Air Section. Three were elderly men of similar type. They were unknown to Biggles, although the faces of two were vaguely familiar.

The fifth man was different, being a good deal younger, and thinner, as if he had led a more active life.

"Come in, Bigglesworth," requested the Air-Commodore quietly. "Let me introduce you.

This is Lord Rutterton of the Foreign Office. . . this is Mr. Lucas Wetherton of the Diplomatic Service . . . Colonel George Grimster, of the Canadian Army, and"—here he indicated the youngest member of the party—"Captain Roderick Mayne?" Turning to the first-named, the Air-Commodore concluded: "This is Bigglesworth sir, the officer I spoke to you about."

"I've heard that name," answered Lord Rutterton, in a deep sonorous voice that made Ginger jump. His eyes were on Biggles' face. "Well, now that we're all here, let's get on,"

he added curtly. "We may as well sit down."

"Will you state the case, sir?" inquired the Air-Commodore, as chairs were being taken round the central table.

"No—no," was the quick answer. "You start, Raymond.

I may have a few words to say later."

Biggles' eyes went to the map case that occupied the entire side of one wall. He observed that the area exposed was Eastern Asia.

Lord Rutterton must have guessed what was passing in Biggles' mind, for he remarked, dryly. "Yes, that's the part of the world with which we are concerned—very concerned.

Carry on, Raymond."

The Air-Commodore cleared his throat, and looking at Biggles began in a voice pitched so low, and with such earnestness, that the gravity

of the situation—whatever it might be—was at once apparent. "Often, in asking you to undertake a mission, I have prefaced my narration by asserting that the particular case under review was of an importance that could hardly be exaggerated. All these, however, were trivial when compared with the one now before us."

"And it's top secret," boomed Lord Rutterton. "You understand that?"

"Of course, sir," answered Biggles.

"Good. Go on, Raymond," requested the peer.

The Air-Commodore continued. "Our case, although we did not know it at the time, began in March of this year. At that date, and for some years previous to it, there had been in the service of the Government a scientist named Professor Felix Lampeter. It is unlikely that you would have heard of him because, like so many men engaged in his class of work, he detested publicity." The Air-Commodore dropped his voice a tone. "As a matter of fact, Professor Lampeter was one of our leading experts on atomic research.

He lived, very quietly, at Oxford. It was his habit after dinner to take a short walk for exercise along the river bank. On the evening of March 7th he went for his walk as usual.

He did not come back. He never has come back. But we know that when he went out he had every intention of coming back because he gave instructions to his housekeeper that coffee and sandwiches were to be taken to his laboratory at eleven-thirty because he would be working late. It was only when these refreshments were taken to the laboratory that his absence was discovered. A good deal of rain had fallen and the river was high; it was a dark night, so the natural assumption, as suicide could be ruled out, was that he had fallen in the river and so met his death. There was no reason to suspect foul play. His loss

was a serious blow to the department for which he was working. So much for Professor Lampeter." The Air-Commodore paused for a moment.

"Working for us in a similar capacity," he continued. "but specialising in remote control of rocket missiles, was a Doctor Otto Kern, an Austrian refugee who had taken out naturalisation papers and made his home in this country during the Nazi regime in Central Europe. He lived, apparently quite happily, at one of our research stations on the coast, journeying from time to time to London to make his report to

the Defence Council.

His only recreation was the sailing of a small boat which he kept in a cove near his home.

On April 22nd he went out for a sail—to clear his brain with some fresh air, as he told his servant. He did not return. Neither he, nor his boat, has been seen since, although a few days later his cap was washed up some miles farther along the shore. Apparently he had met with a misadventure, although as he was an experienced sailor, and the sea was fairly calm at the time, it was not easy to understand how an accident could happen.

Anyway, that was blow number two. Then, to cap this sequence of tragedies, in May, Squadron-Leader Kerr-Watson, our supersonic aircraft designer, disappeared in somewhat similar circumstances. He was a married man who lived with his family in a small house not far from the Experimental Establishment at Farnborough. He left his home as usual after breakfast, and took, as was his habit, a short cut across the fields to the aerodrome. His wife saw him go. He was in good spirits because he had just completed an experimental job on which he had been working for months, and was confident of its success. He never arrived at the airfield. What happened to him we don't know, but whatever it was, it was something for which he was not prepared when he left his home. Naturally, in the light of this third disappearance we had to take a different view of the earlier tragedies. What was happening to these men? Could this be a coincidence? It seemed unlikely. It began to look as if a sinister plot was afoot. Who were the instigators? What was their object? If it was to deprive us of our leading technical experts, why did they not murder these men and have done with it? The alternative theory, that they had in fact been abducted and were still alive, was just as alarming. You see my point? If they were dead—well, they would be prevented from doing any further work for us; but if they were still alive they might be forced to work for someone opposed to British interests. You follow?"

Biggles nodded. No one spoke.

The Air-Commodore resumed. "At this juncture we decided to warn our friends across the Atlantic in case anything of the sort should start there. It had, we discovered, already started, although there had been no suspicion of foul play. In short, we learned that Canada had lost in curious circumstances the man responsible for the defence of its northern outposts—General John Gorton, who, incidentally, was a

leading light in anti-atomic warfare. Which explains Colonel Grimster's presence here to-day. General Gorton went out to visit one of the northern stations. He did not arrive; he did not return, and search has failed to find him, dead or alive.

"In view of all this you will have no difficulty in believing that the Committee of Imperial Defence became very worried. The thing had to be stopped, for if it went on it was obviously only a matter of time before we lost every good man in our service. How were we to stop it? To furnish every research worker in the country with an armed guard would be a tremendous undertaking, and hardly practicable, anyway. Moreover, it would tell those responsible for the abductions—as there was now reason to think they were—

that we had realised what was going on. You must understand that no word of this has been allowed to get into the newspapers. The tragedy of the missing men has been attributed to accident. Naturally, Scotland Yard was called in. It was not easy to know what to do or where to start. The position was a delicate one. It wouldn't do to make a mistake. We dare not, without definite proof of what we suspected, impair our relations with other countries—but you will have grasped the significance of the diplomatic angle.

Our first steps, therefore, were directed to find out who was behind the thing. It might have been the work of a crank, or a foreign country that was anxious to retard our atomic development. Well, this is what we did. One of our men here, a smart young sergeant of the new school named Tom Gale, was selected for an experiment. What he did was, I may say, his own idea." The Air-Commodore smiled wanly.

"In a few weeks, by what the newspapers call a build-up, we converted Gale into a top-grade atomic specialist. This was achieved by carefully prepared press and radio reports, and the like. In brief, Gale, under an assumed name, soon became known to the man in the street as our leading atomic expert. He worked at the research depot, and as far as he could he lived up to the part. Of course, he knew he was playing a dangerous game, but he was at least forewarned, which the missing men were not. He hoped, of course, that an attempt would be made to murder him, or abduct him, in which case—assuming that the attempt failed—he would be able to provide us with a clue to put us on the right track. The name Gale adopted for his plan was Vernon Victor Vale, and the reason he chose that name was on account of the simplicity of the initials. They were unusual, and they could be written quickly without appearing to be initials. They could, for instance, be a mere scrawl, such as a child might make. Should he be



abducted, it would, we thought, be possible for him to leave his mark—the three Vees—somewhere. And in this he succeeded, or else we are in the realm of incredible coincidence.

"You must understand," went on the Air-Commodore, "that all this happened some time ago. In fact, it is five months since Gale—or Vale, as we must now call him—

disappeared."

"So they got him?" Biggles did no more than breathe the words.

"Yes, they got him," confirmed the Air-Commodore. "At any rate, Vale disappeared as completely, and as mysteriously, as those who had gone before him. You can imagine with what anxiety we waited for some word from him—if only the three Vees. None came. Weeks passed, and we had given up hope of hearing from him when, a fortnight ago, into the British Embassy at Nanking, in China, there walked a native in the last stages of emaciation. He made sips with his hands, and at first he was taken for a poor creature who was out of his mind. He did not speak. The reason was, he was unable to do so because his tongue had been cut out, very neatly, obviously by a skilled surgeon.

Being quite illiterate, he couldn't write, either. But, as I have said, he could make signs, and these were at length interpreted to mean that he was a messenger, that his head was to be shaved, and that he was to be given a large sum of money." The Air-Commodore smiled again, bleakly.

"Well, his head was shaved, or part of it, for it was soon discovered that a small portion of it had been shaved in the not too distant past. And there, sure enough, on his scalp had been tattooed a queer-looking device, apparently with a needle and an indelible pencil.

First, there was the symbol that stands for a dollar, followed by the number one thousand. This, it transpired, was the sum that had been promised to the man for his services. Below was a map as primitive as could be imagined, although in the circumstances it could hardly be anything else. Beneath this was a row of three Vees."

"Amazing," muttered Biggles.

The Air-Commodore continued. "Of course, our people in China knew nothing about what had been going on here, so they might well have been pardoned had they ignored a message so fantastic. Fortunately



this did not happen. The man was detained. A tracing was made of the design on his scalp and sent home to see if we knew anything about it.

So, unless an extraordinary coincidence has occurred, Vale has got his initials to us, as he promised. We wasted no time following up this unexpected clue, and this, briefly, is what has so far been ascertained. I will now ask Captain Mayne, our expert on internal Chinese affairs, who has spent most of his life in the Far East, to carry on with the story."

Captain Mayne took up the narrative. His tone was clear and his manner concise. "I saw this Chinese messenger and recognised him as an Orochon—that is, a member of a tribe that inhabits the practically unexplored territory in the region of the Manchurian and eastern Siberian frontiers.

The fellow couldn't speak, but he could hear, and he made signs that he understood me when I spoke in the language used in that district. I was there myself on one occasion, and my knowledge of the country, meagre though it is, combined with the sketch map, enables me to locate the territory roughly, although not with as much detail as I would like. The key really lies in a curiously shaped lake—but I'll return to this presently. Let us deal first with the messenger, who has now gone home to his people. I tried to persuade him to act as a guide, but nothing would induce him to go anywhere near the area where apparently he had been mutilated; so as we couldn't hold him against his will we had no choice but to give him his reward and let him go. Not that he would have been of very much use, probably. Apart from not being able to speak, he was a sick man.

"You must understand that my only method of culling information from him was of the simplest possible character. I asked questions to which he could only respond by indications of yes or no, or by making signs that were not always easy to follow. As far as I can make out he was on a hunting expedition when he was seized by a party of men and taken to a district he had never seen before. There, presumably to prevent him from revealing to anyone what he had seen, should he escape, his tongue was cut out. Then, with a large number of other prisoners he was made to work like a slave, first clearing a large area of forest, and later squaring the timber, which was used for the building of huts. The place, I gather, is near the narrowest end of the lake shown on the sketch map.

Actually, the whole country is strewn with lakes of all shapes and sizes, but I think I know the one. There were, according to the

messenger, several white men at this place.

Others came from time to time by aeroplane. Our man has no idea of what they were doing, or their nationality. Naturally, living in a barbed wire compound, where the wretched slaves died like flies, he didn't care. An interesting point is, in a perpetual hunt to get more slaves the country has been almost depopulated, survivors having fled from such a dangerous locality. The man in charge of the slaving operations is an enormous cross-eyed Mongolian who carries a whip which he uses freely on the workers. Anyone caught attempting to escape is beaten to death, yet so desperate was the plight of the slaves that several tried it, with what success is not known. Our man had an added inducement to get away. He was told by one of the white men that if he could get to a British officer in China and reveal a message tattooed on his head, he would be given a thousand dollars. That, I think, is about all."

"What an extraordinary story," murmured Biggles.

The Air-Commodore came back into the conversation. "Well, Bigglesworth, I think enough has been said to give you a pretty good idea of the situation," he observed. "Vale was abducted and taken to the remote heart of what is perhaps the most difficult country of access left in the world. We may assume that where he is, the other missing men will also be found. Vale got his message home and is now waiting for us to act. Rescue isn't going to be easy. The map, such as it is, is vane. Only by great good fortune have we a man who has actually been over the country, otherwise our task would be almost hopeless. Not only have we appalling physical obstacles to overcome, but we shall in a way be trespassers in a foreign country. If we were sure that the lake is situated in China, or Manchuria, then it wouldn't matter overmuch; but if it happens to be in eastern Siberia, which is Russian territory—well, that might be a horse of a very different colour.

And it isn't as though the point could be settled with any degree of certainty, because the boundaries are still a matter of dispute—not that there are any boundary posts, or anything like that. No one can say where Chinese, Russian, or Mongolian spheres of influence begin and end. Apart from the people we are up against, the whole country is infested by gangs of armed bandits to whom throat-cutting is the easiest and most natural way of disposing of anyone who crosses their path. But something will have to be done.

First, there is the humanitarian aspect. These unfortunate men of ours

will never see this country again unless we fetch them. Apart from that, we need them here. At the moment, I fear, they may be forced to work under threat of death or torture, by people who bear us nothing but ill will. At least, I can think of no other reason why these particular men should be kidnapped and taken to a place so remote that in the ordinary way they would never have been heard of again. It boils down to this. We've got to get these fellows out. What do you think of it?"

Biggles drew a deep breath. "It sounds a pretty grim business to me," he answered. "

What you really mean is, will I go to look for them?"

The Air-Commodore nodded slowly. "Quite right. That's it. An aircraft would cover territory in a day which overland would occupy months of time."

Biggles shrugged. "Obviously, someone will have to go, and I suppose we're as well equipped for the job as anyone. Of course we'll go."

"What do you think of the situation generally, Bigglesworth?" asked Lord Rutterton, his eyes on Biggles' face. "The first thing one wonders, naturally, is this: Are we dealing with an individual, or a hostile power?"

Biggles thought for a moment. "I doubt if an individual would be able to provide the enormous sums of money that must have been required to abduct these men and transport them to where they are now. On the other hand, no country would assume responsibility for such a scheme. I'd say we are dealing with an individual, or a syndicate of people, financed by a power that has a particular spite against Britain. That I think is proved by the fact that all the abducted men are British. In the event of a show-down the local man on the spot would have to take the rap—not the government really responsible.

"

The peer nodded. "Quite so."

"Still, it's the man on the spot with whom we are really concerned," averred Biggles. He looked at Mayne. "Do you know who normally runs this part of the world?" he inquired.

Mayne shook his head. "No. I doubt if anyone does outside the country itself. There are local big-wigs all over China and Mongolia who want

to run things their way. They may call themselves mandarins, or princes, or generals, but really they're nothing but common brigands who use the people for their own ends. Some are enormously wealthy, and are, in fact, dictators in a small way. Any of them would work in with a European nation who would dish out money and weapons, but I doubt if any one of them would on his own account think in terms of atomic bombs. No, there must be European brains behind that.

It is these rascals who are giving the Chinese Government a headache. It's a vast country, and I imagine, beyond the power of any government to keep it in order. That there is some local big chief in the racket we need not doubt, because without such help Europeans of any nationality would be up against all sorts of difficulties. This slave labour, for instance. Someone must be able to speak the local language."

"That's likely to be our difficulty," put in Biggles. "None of us speaks a word of Chinese, much less local dialects. If we're unable to speak to local people we shall be handi-capped, if not absolutely bogged, from the start. We ought to have someone with us who can at any rate speak

Chinese."

"What about you, Mayne?" boomed Lord Rutterton. "You've seen the country."

"I'm willing to go, if it will help," offered Mayne without hesitation.

"If you would it would solve a major problem," declared Biggles. "In this sort of enterprise one man who has been over the ground, and speaks the language, is worth more than a battalion of bayonets."

Mayne agreed.

Lord Rutterton spoke again, looking hard at Biggles. "I want you to understand exactly what you are taking on," said he. "Whatever happens the British Government must not be brought into this. If things went wrong a situation could arise that might be exceedingly embarrassing for us."

"Such a situation would no doubt be exceedingly embarrassing for me, too, sir,"

returned Biggles coldly. "And if it comes to that, it must already be more than embarrassing for the unfortunate fellows already there."

"Quite so—er---quite so," agreed the peer, rather uncomfortably, glancing at the Air-Commodore, who smiled faintly.

"Still, don't worry, sir. We ought to be able to stand on our own feet," asserted Biggles. "

If we're caught—well, we shall just be a bunch of adventurers fooling about on our own account."

"That excuse might be as good as any," agreed Lord Rutterton. He glanced at the clock. "

Now I must be getting along. I'll leave the matter in your hands, Bigglesworth. Raymond and Mayne will give you all the help possible. Don't hesitate to spend money—should you find it necessary."

"I won't," promised Biggles warmly. "I shall probably need quite a lot," he added softly, as the conference broke up. "One thing I shall need is a set of photographs of the missing men," he told the Air-Commodore. "I shall want to be able to recognise them if I see them."

"That's easy," promised the Air-Commodore.

Biggles touched Captain Mayne on the arm. "If you're not in a hurry I'd like you to come along to my office. There are one or two things I'd like to talk over with you."

## DISTANT FRONTIERS

"BEFORE we start on anything in the way of organisation I thought it would be a good thing if you told us something about the country we're bound for," explained Biggles, after the airmen were back in their own office. He offered Mayne his cigarette case. "In fact," he went on, "it's no use trying to make a plan until we have at least a rough idea of the conditions we're likely to find. I've been around a bit, but what I know about this particular section of the globe you could put in your eye without noticing it. I've seen it on the map, and sometimes wondered just what was there; but that's all."

The expert in Chinese affairs smiled. "You're not alone in that," he asserted, lighting his cigarette from Biggles' lighter. "I may be the only Britisher who has ever been there. I doubt if a dozen Europeans have seen it. In fact, as far as I know, the only people who have been right across the territory were a few White Russian refugees after the Bolshevik revolution. I went ostensibly on a hunting trip, but my real purpose—as it was part of my job—was to see just what went on

there, to check up on the strange rumours that occasionally trickled through to the outside world. Actually, I spent most of my time trying to get out again. Like you, I've been around a bit, and I've travelled over most of China, but this area was unlike anything I'd seen before, or have seen since. One's first impression is that it's all crazy, or else you are."

"But I say, look here old man, if nobody ever goes there, how do the jolly old rumours trickle out—if you see what I mean?" inquired Bertie.

"I was referring particularly to Europeans," explained Mayne. "A few Orientals, mostly Chinese and Koreans, go in and out regularly, but they are only permitted to do so because they carry merchandise that the natives want—weapons and liquor, mostly—

which they swap for the queer commodities the country produces. Even so, it must be a risky business, because from what I learned quite a few are murdered on the way out. . .

not so much by the natives as by the cut-throat refugees who have found safe sanctuary there, mostly deserters from the Chinese army. One has a feeling that one is always being watched, and is never safe. There are no roads, of course, and as the country is pretty rough one is bound to follow the jungle tracks, as the local brigands know only too well.

White Swan shooting, as they call it—which means the murder of returning Koreans, who wear white shirts—is the popular pastime."

"The profits of these merchants must be pretty high or they wouldn't take such risks," put in Algy. "Why do they go? What are these commodities you mentioned just now?"

Mayne laughed. "You'd never guess."

"I wouldn't try," returned Algy.

"There's a certain amount of gold dust, panned in the streams and gorges, but the chief items are deer antlers, ginseng, oak mushrooms, and the hearts, livers, teeth and claws of tigers."

"Who on earth wants such things?" broke in Ginger, in an astonished voice. "What's ginseng, anyway?"

"Ginseng is a root shaped like a human torso," replied Mayne. "It's

thought to possess magical properties—ensures long life and immunity from disease. That may be all rot, but in China the stuff is worth its weight in gold. Deer antlers, ground up, are also medicine. The hearts and livers of tigers, dried, have the reputation of making the weak strong and the nervous brave. Tiger teeth and Claws are talismans that protect the wearer from the attacks of wild beasts. Oak mushrooms—a sort of fungus that grows on old oak trees—are a delicacy in the Far East. That may sound silly to you, but some of the things people in this country waste their money on sound just as daft to a Chinaman."

"So there are tigers there, eh?" murmured Bertie.

"Plenty. The Amur tiger is first cousin to the Bengal tiger. There are panthers, too, and bears. Their skins are another export."

"What about the country itself?" asked Biggles. "What does it look like?"

Mayne flicked the ash off his cigarette. "Well, one's first impression is that nature has played a cockeyed practical joke. That is simply due to the fact that you are at the spot where the Arctic and the tropics bump into each other, so to speak. . . where north meets south and east meets west. Thus you get the flora and fauna of both; tigers, panthers, wild boars and pythons tread the same tracks as reindeer, wolves and sables. In the bird line you get most of our northern birds flying beside Chinese herons, black swans, ibis, flamingoes and pelicans—pink ones, at that. In the forests, cork and palm trees rub shoulders with cedars, walnuts, wild apples and cherries, oak trees and grape vines. The whole country teems with game, large and small."

"What about the actual terrain?" inquired Biggles. "That's the most important thing from my angle."

"Most of it comprises miles and miles of marsh, bog, and stagnant water, for which reason the wildfowl have to be seen to be believed. Swans and geese flight in millions, and that's no exaggeration. From that aspect the place is a naturalist's paradise. But as for getting about—that's a different story. There are vast areas of nothing but reeds and giant bulrushes growing out of black, sticky mud. There are some mountains, too, with terrific rock gorges. There are rivers and lakes everywhere. They're full of fish. I caught a pike over six feet long which I reckon must have weighed about a hundred pounds."

"What's the climate like, generally?" questioned Biggles.

"In summer it's blazing hot, but the winters are just as cold," replied



Mayne, "In spring and early summer, when I was there, the country was ablaze with wild flowers, particularly lilies and peonies. I saw butterflies as big as swallows. Some of them are black.

Taking it all round it's a weird, mysterious place. At night the will-o'-the-wisps hang over the marshes like lost souls. Incidentally, the fireflies are the biggest and brightest I ever saw. There is this about it; with flesh, fish and fowl, a man with a gun need never starve.

The natives produce a kind of wheat, but you have to be careful how you eat it because it makes you drunk. Apparently some sort of fungus flourishes on it which sets up fermentation and creates a strong line in alcohol."

"What are mosquitoes like?" asked Bettie suspiciously.

"Pretty grim," admitted Mayne. "Even worse is a big, red bug known locally as a gnus. In places they make life a misery. I came out looking as though I'd had a bad go of smallpox."

"How long were you there?" asked Ginger.

"About six months."

"What were the natives like—the real natives?"

"Not bad, although if what the messenger says is correct, in the area we're concerned with, most of them have cleared out on account of this slave racket. I got on well enough.

That, no doubt, was partly due to the fact that I handed over to them most of the game I shot. Moreover, the fellow

I had with me as a guide knew the people well, and their language, having lived amongst them for years. As a matter of detail, he was an ex-Russian political prisoner named Alexis Petroffsky who had escaped from a prison in Siberia proper. At one time he was a colonel in a crack Cossack regiment, in the Imperial Russian Army, stationed at Vladivostok—at which time he used to go into the interior on hunting trips. It was natural, therefore, that he should head for the place when he broke jail. In many ways he was an amazing fellow, and a queer piece of work to look at, having lost one side of his face in an affair with a tiger. I could never decide whether he was genuine or a superb bluffer.

He told me he had spent some time in London, and he certainly speaks English well enough. I found him a grand companion. His big weakness was the bottle—but there, that pernicious brew they call vodka is the curse of the country. It's the old story of traders bringing fire-water in to barter for gold. Still, I can't complain. He got me in and out safely, although where he is now I don't know. Of course, this was some time ago, so conditions may have changed somewhat. There's a chance that I might meet some of the Orochons I got to know. They would be helpful. I could find my way, I think, to a village where I put up for a time."

"And you learned a bit of the language?" asked Biggles.

"If you can call it a language," returned Mayne, smiling. "The Orochons don't talk. They bark at each other like dogs. At least it sounds like that when you first hear it."

All very interesting," murmured Biggles. "Now let's get down to brass tacks. From what you've told us it doesn't sound much of a country for flying operations."

"I couldn't imagine anything worse," admitted Mayne frankly.

"There's no level ground where an aircraft could land?"

"If there is I didn't see it. What level ground there is, is either marsh or forest. What might look like a flat plain from the air would probably turn out to be reeds or bulrushes several feet high. Even the grass is waist deep. I'm not a pilot, but I'd say that a landing on any unsurveyed ground would be asking for trouble."

"But there are, you say, plenty of lakes?"

"Lakes by the score. Practically all the lower ground that isn't marsh is under water."

"Then it looks like being an occasion for a marine aircraft," opined Biggles, looking at the others. "By the way," he went on, turning back to Mayne: "Do any aircraft of any sort operate over this region?"

"I should think it's most unlikely," answered Mayne thoughtfully. "Of course I'm not including those which, according to the messenger, are being used by the slave gang. The fellow made signs with his hands which I could only take to mean aircraft. Certainly the place is far from any air route, regular or irregular. There would be no reason for one. At least, I can't imagine what sort of traffic it would take."

"I imagine the enemy, these Europeans mentioned by the messenger, use aircraft for the same reason that we shall have to," went on Biggles. "On account of the time factor alone a plane must be the only reasonable form of transport. I suppose, Mayne, there are no such things as maps of this territory?"

Mayne shook his head. "Certainly nothing likely to be of any use to us. I've never seen anything but the broad outline one finds in the average atlas. Even on these I imagine that any features marked, such as the chief mountains and rivers, are mostly guesswork.

There are no towns. The village I stayed in, called Kossuri, a fair-sized place on the edge of a lake, was merely a collection of huts. The people lived by hunting, and buried their dead—if we can say buried—in trees. The body is rolled in birch bark and hoisted up out of the reach of wolves. You come across these grisly cemeteries all over the place. After the funeral everyone gets drunk on vodka. Drinking seems to be the only recreation."

"Nice people," murmured Biggles. "But tell me, do you think you could find your way to this lake which is to be our final objective?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't like to promise," returned Mayne. "I'm assuming from its shape, and its relative position to

the Ussuri Mountains, which are also marked on the messenger's map, that it is one of the lakes I passed on my journey. If I am right, I'd say it's about thirty miles long by anything from five to ten miles wide. I'm right about the area, anyhow. It was an Orochon who brought the message, and the place we're talking about is in Orochon territory."

"You'd have no difficulty in guiding me to the general area in an aircraft?"

"That shouldn't be very difficult. If we could get anywhere near, I'd be willing to land and make inquiries."

"If you could find anyone to ask," reminded Biggles. "Don't forget what the messenger said about the people clearing out on account of the slave business."

"There should still be a few of the tough lads hanging about, although if they saw us, there would be a risk that they might shoot first and show themselves afterwards. But that's a risk we shall have to take."

"It looks as if there will be plenty of risks, anyway," remarked Biggles.

"One of the biggest, from what you've told us, will be the actual landing. You see, we shouldn't be able to do much cruising about, or word of our presence, or the presence of a strange aircraft, would soon reach the enemy's ears. The only Sing against an aircraft on a job like this, is, when it's in the air it's so confoundedly conspicuous. As I see it at the moment, the general idea would be to land near the objective—not too close—hide the plane, and using it as a base, operate on foot. Whatever happens there is bound to be some hiking at the finish."

"I agree," concurred Mayne. "If you intend landing on a lake there should be no difficulty in hiding the machine in the reeds that flourish round the edge, or surround most of the islands. Nearly every lake I saw was dotted with islands. But when it comes to operating on foot we're going to be pretty conspicuous unless we do something about it. We should be recognised from a mile off as Europeans."

Biggles shrugged. "That can't very well be prevented."

"I don't agree," argued Mayne. "Surely it would be much safer to adopt some sort of local costume—that used by the Korean merchants, for instance?"

"But the skins of these people are yellow—more or less?" "Is there any reason why ours shouldn't be yellow?"

Biggles frowned, and thought for a moment. "In the ordinary Way I'm all against dressing up, which has always struck me as theatrical, and usually unnecessary," he said slowly. "But I see your point. If we made ourselves look like people who are commonly seen there we might pass without comment—certainly with less comment than if a bunch of Europeans suddenly arrived on the scene."

"Exactly."

"It might be worth considering. I'll think about it. Naturally. I'm willing to do anything which in your opinion would make our task easier. It would be fatal to give the enemy cause to suspect that a rescue party was on the spot. We should be hunted from the outset; the prisoners would be kept under stricter supervision, or moved to some other place, in which case our trump card, our knowledge of their position, would be lost."

"But surely," put in Algy, "the very presence of an aircraft will make the enemy suspicious? You can't fly a machine across the country without it being seen or heard."

"True enough, if the machine was cruising about obviously looking for something,"

admitted Biggles. "But there may be a way out of that difficulty. There's nothing to prevent us from painting Chinese insignia on our wings and fuselage, in which case, if we're seen it might be supposed that the aircraft is one of the Chinese Air Force that has got off its course.

"Admittedly, we could only get away with that once. If the machine hung about, and was seen too often, the enemy would soon guess that it was looking for something. It seems to me that what we really need is two machines, a big transport for getting ourselves and our equipment in and out of the country, and a small machine for reconnaissance work. I think we're bound to do a certain amount of reconnaissance in the first place, in order to locate the exact position of the enemy camp; otherwise one might wander about the country for months without finding anything. If the enemy are using aircraft then they must have a landing ground; and if there is a landing ground we ought to be able to spot it from the air straight away. We might even

take a strip of photographs covering the area at the end of the lake, to examine at leisure.

Having located the enemy outfit we should then work on foot. It wouldn't matter if we lost the smaller machine. We should still have the big one hidden away to get us home.

After all, our job isn't to start a minor war, but to find our men and bring them back. But I think we've got enough data now to work on. The final plan will have to be carefully worked out, and that'll take a little time. I'll get cracking on it, and let you know, Mayne, when we're ready to start. Meanwhile, keep in touch. But it's past lunch-time. Let's go out and get something to eat."

ALL SET

FAR beyond the wild Sikhota-Alin Mountains of Manchuria, out and across the great Ussurian Plains where countless lakes interlaced by furtive streams lie hidden in a world of reeds, the day was slowly dying. To the west, the sun, its daily task complete, sank wearily into a purple horizon, followed by an immense arc of transparent colour, while far to the east, beyond a belt of purest turquoise, some shreds of clouds took fire and blazed with flames of living carmine. Below, from

out of the mysterious distances, crept the sombre shades of twilight to soften the harsh outlines of the untamed land, and extinguish one by one the glowing reflected light of lakes and rivers. With the shadows came silence, a profound hush that seemed to take possession of the universe. Even the restless bulrushes, abandoned by the breezes of the day, stood erect and came to rest. The twittering of innumerable birds died away.

At one spot only was there movement, and that was near the edge of one of the larger lakes, where an islet, a mere mound of jungle held in close embrace by a belt of rushes, nestled like an uncut emerald in a tarnished silver setting.

There, a figure, a human figure with an olive-yellow skin, parting the rushes to make a passage, moved slowly forward to their extremity and then stood gazing across the sullen landscape. Clad in a cotton shirt worn outside faded blue linen trousers, it was appropriate to the scene.

But a closer inspection of the little island would have revealed certain things that were by no means appropriate to such a setting. Of these, the most outstanding although not easily detected, was an aeroplane, or to be more literally correct, a float seaplane. To be specific, it was a two-seat, single-engined Birada Trainer, an American type built under licence in China, although this was not easily discernible as most of it, and all the upper surfaces, had been heavily camouflaged with bundles of reeds. Only an aerial stood clear.

The undersides of the wings, could they have been examined, would have shown the twelve-pointed white star on a blue ground which is the national Chinese aircraft. Near the aircraft, under a thick-leaved tree that stood on reasonably dry ground, had been pitched a tent of the familiar war-time brown and green camouflaged material. By the entrance, a second figure, clad as the first, squatted by a spirit stove on which rested a kettle just coming to the boil. It is doubtful if his best friends would have recognised Biggles, who, as the steam lifted the lid of the kettle, called softly. "Everything quiet, Mayne?" And on receiving the answer "Okay," replied, "Come and have a cup of tea."

Captain Mayne, the pseudo-Oriental, who had been keeping watch at the water's edge, joined Biggles at the tent. "Not a soul in sight," he remarked. "I don't think we could have found a better place, or a handier one."



*Not a soul in sight*

A month had passed since the conference at Scotland Yard, and for those taking part in "

Operation Rescue", as the enterprise had been officially designated, it had been a busy one. Briefly, the plan finally evolved by Biggles, in collaboration with Mayne, who had the advantage of knowing the ground, was this. It adhered closely to his original idea. Two aircraft had been requisitioned for the task. One, the one that now stood close



at hand, was a small machine which, operating from the island base, was to be used only for reconnaissance until the enemy camp had been located. The sole purpose of the other, a heavy flying boat transport, was to carry the entire party home on the conclusion of the mission. Marine types had been chosen because the nature of the terrain, as described by Mayne, obviously made the use of landplanes a hazardous business. Both types chosen were employed by the Chinese Air Force, as reorganised by the Commission of Aeronautical Affairs at the conclusion of the Japanese war. They had in fact been acquired in China. Both carried Chinese markings. The big transport, which had yet to come, was also an American type, a twinengined "Ranger"—a converted ocean-patrol bomber which provided ample accommodation for the purpose for which it was required.

It was not advisable, Biggles had averred, for the two machines to fly out together. One might pass where two would cause comment. Moreover, a suitable landing site had to be found, and as the smaller machine was handier for this purpose it was decided to send it out first to select and prepare the camp. Biggles was to fly it, with Captain Mayne as the obvious choice for the passenger. Somewhere reasonably near the objective the base camp would be established and the main operation conducted from it. The big machine was to allow the Birada two days' grace, sufficient time, it was thought, for the preliminary work to be completed.

Biggles, under Captain Mayne's guidance, had experienced no difficulty in finding a suitable spot, and the smaller machine was already at the chosen hiding-place. This, according to Mayne's calculations, was about thirty miles from the supposed position of the place where the abducted scientists were being held. Nearer than that Biggles dare not go. The big machine, which was to start during the hours of darkness in order to avoid being seen from the more thickly populated part of the route, was due to arrive at daybreak, flying on a compass course plotted by Biggles, who would, he promised Algy—who was to fly the transport out—be on or as near as possible to that particular line of country.

So far everything had gone according to plan. The Birada was well hidden in its nest and all preparations had been made for the reception of the transport. Camouflaged netting had been stretched from tree to tree on a small island, and on this reeds had been strewn to form a cover that should keep the aircraft safe from aerial observation. Watch had been kept, but so far there had been no indication that the arrival of the Birada had been noticed. At any rate, there had been no visitors, although in view of what the messenger

had said about the country being depopulated, this was not surprising.

For the rest, Biggles, somewhat reluctantly, had accepted Mayne's advice in the matter of disguises. Being forced to operate on foot between their base and the enemy camp, in European clothes they would be conspicuous objects should they be seen, Mayne had argued. Whereas, dressed in the manner of Koreans, they would attract little, if any attention, even if their presence was reported. The country might be depopulated on account of the slave raiders, but there was always a chance that they might be seen by the raiders themselves, stated Mayne. If once the enemy got word of Europeans in the vicinity their suspicions could hardly fail to be aroused, and then anything might happen.

To the force of this argument Biggles was bound to submit, so before the start each member of the party had to have a close hair-cut, and a bath in a solution provided by Mayne, which gave the skin the required tint. Bertie had complained loudly when he discovered that the colour was in fact a stain which no amount of scrubbing would remove, but, as Mayne pointed out, what was the use of a dye which the first shower of rain would wash off? It would, he said, wear off in time, and with that consolation Bertie had to be content. It was on, anyway, said Biggles, smiling, and as no amount of protest would get it off he might as well forget about it.

Mayne had also procured the simple garments which were part of the make-up. They would, he said naively, get plenty of dirt on them to complete the disguise before the affair was over. The truth of this, in Biggles' case, was already in evidence, for in spite of the mosquito net, after one day and night on the island his face was so spotted with insect bites that he gave the impression of suffering from an attack of measles. The ground, too, being boggy, had resulted in a liberal distribution of mud.

Equipment, as usual, had needed careful thought and preparation. Most of it was coming out in the big machine. A boat of some sort was essential to get to and fro between the island and the mainland. A collapsible rubber dinghy had been selected for easy transport. All cooking would have to be done on a spirit stove, as smoke from an open fire would certainly attract attention if it were seen. Gunshots would have the same effect, so while every member of the party would be armed, there could be no shooting of game except in dire emergency. All the food they were likely to require had, therefore, to be brought in cans. Both aircraft were equipped with radio, although here again this was only to be used in situations that would make its

use imperative—bearing in mind, Biggles pointed out, that the enemy would be similarly equipped.

Perhaps the most important pieces of equipment carried by the small machine were its cameras, for vertical and oblique photography; for in the search for the enemy camp they would enable suspicious objects to be reproduced and studied at leisure. This in turn meant developing and printing devices. That the enemy camp would be well screened against air observation was not to be doubted, averred Biggles.

The rest of the "dunnage" comprised such articles as Biggles, in his long experience of expeditions of this sort, had found were usually worth their weight. Actually, on this occasion there was no need for them to stint themselves, as anything not required could be dumped before the homeward journey, when the big machine—it was hoped—would be heavily loaded with its extra passengers. Keeping in mind the nature of the mission, such useful tools as wire cutters, files and the like, were not overlooked.

Little had been said about the perilous nature of the undertaking, although this, perhaps, was because the dangers were obvious to everyone. In the first place, the mere act of flying over such a country, with no landing, servicing or maintenance facilities, was hazardous enough. In spite of all that had been said about the country being depopulated, there was, Biggles knew, a serious risk of the machine being seen on the way out, and word of their arrival reaching the enemy, an enemy from which nothing but ruthlessness was to be expected. The only steps that could mitigate this risk had been taken by using machines which, should they be seen, would be taken for Chinese aircraft that had lost their way. The risk was greater in the case of the smaller machine, which would have to do a certain amount of flying after its arrival—how much would depend on circumstances. With luck, Biggles thought, one run over the supposed position of the objective should be enough to enable them to locate it; but this was by no means certain. When this happened, hostile eyes would certainly see the machine. That was inevitable, and he was prepared for it. They might, he thought, get away with it once—but not twice. It was possible, although he did not think it likely, that the enemy camp, on account of its sinister purpose, might be protected by anti-aircraft guns. If so, the Birada would come under fire the moment it appeared, and perhaps take punishment that would put it out of action. As an extra safety measure, therefore, the machine had been provided with parachutes for the use of its crew.

Yet this was only the beginning. Even if all went well, and the enemy

camp was located, there would still be the more difficult task of getting into it, and out of it, with the men they had come to rescue. Just how this was to be achieved had not even been discussed, for to make a plan without knowing what obstacles there were to be surmounted was, as Biggles said, a waste of time. It was clear that all hands would be needed, for apart from the actual rescue party someone would have to stay in camp to mount guard, and another would be required to man the canoe between the island and the shore.

These were the known difficulties and dangers. That unknown ones would present themselves was certain. These could only be dealt with as they arose. Indeed, that very afternoon, during a casual conversation with Mayne, one had loomed up. Mayne, talking of his hunting trip, had recalled some of the native methods of killing big game. One of these was by means of pitfalls along the jungle tracks used by game; deep pits, artfully concealed, with pointed stakes in the bottom on which a trapped beast would be impaled by its weight. That such traps would be abandoned, just as they were, when the natives had left the district, was certain, and the knowledge that they were there introduced into a simple walk cause for acute anxiety.

So, as the day died, and the advance party outside their tent made a frugal meal of tea, biscuits and "bully", Biggles had plenty to occupy his mind. His first concern was to get the big machine down safely when it arrived, for even this simple operation presented difficulties, chief of which would be to let Algy know exactly where they were. Whatever method employed there would be a risk of the signal being seen or heard by someone outside their own party. After a debate it had been decided to use radio for the purpose. A signal on a single sustained note, it was thought, should be enough. That the enemy, if he happened to be listening, might also pick up the note, was obvious; but even so, asserted Biggles, it ought to be possible to get the Ranger down before the enemy could bring direction-finding apparatus into action. The signal would be weak, to give an impression of distance. Anyway, a chance had to be taken by one method or another.

Little was said during the meal. Once Mayne pointed across the darkening waters of the lake to a distant shore, and remarked: "Unless I'm off the track altogether, Kos-suri, the fang tzu where I stayed with my Cossack hunter friend, is over there." As an afterthought he added: "A fang tzu is what in this part of the world they call a village."

Biggles nodded, and made a slap at the back of his left hand on which several mosquitoes were also making an evening meal. "If it's all the same to you I'm going to get into my mosquito net before these little

devils eat what they left of me last night," he said. "We shall have to be on the move early, anyway. I want to be ready for the Ranger as soon as it gets within earshot. The weather seems to be set fair, which is a blessing."

Mayne agreed.

"With any luck, by this time to-morrow we should know something," concluded Biggles, as he moved back into the tent.

## DANGER AND DISASTER

BIGGLES was up before dawn, to discover with a shock that the land was shrouded in white, opaque mist, that reduced visibility to zero. It was chilly, too, so he lost no time in putting the kettle on for a hot drink. This done he checked the radio, and then roused Mayne, who was still asleep. Pointing through the open flap of the tent he inquired how long the fog was likely to last, assuming that during his previous visit he may have had some experience of it. "I wasn't expecting anything like this at this time of the year," he told Mayne bitterly. "One thing is quite certain. No aircraft could get down in that—not even if the pilot was over his home airfield."

"We're unlucky," answered Mayne, dressing quickly. "I've seen it happen, but not often."

In fact, I used to hope it would happen because it made the wildfowl fly low, so that I could get a shot. It's caused by a slant of cold air coming in from the north."

"I don't care what causes it, how long is it likely to last? That's all I want to know,"

demanded Biggles.

"Not long. It'll disappear as the sun warms things up," was the not very comforting answer.

"Well, until it does, the Ranger will have to sit up top-sides burning petrol," muttered Biggles. "It should be along any minute now. Hark!

What's that?"

From the distance, growing in volume every moment, came a rushing noise, as of an approaching hurricane.

"Geese," answered Mayne. "Geese or swans—or both." And even as he spoke, with a tremendous clamour the birds began to pass low overhead. How many there were could not even remotely be guessed, for the swishing of countless wings lasted for several minutes.

Biggles lit a cigarette. "Well, the Ranger has only to barge into a party like that and it'll come down all right—in pieces," he observed gloomily.

More geese went over, the leader honking loudly. There were flights of other birds, too.

"This is something I didn't take into account," remarked Biggles.

"I told you what the wildfowl population was like," reminded Mayne.

"I know you did, but I couldn't imagine anything like this."

"They only flight early morning and late evening."

"Very obliging of them," returned Biggles sarcastically. "Meanwhile, it looks as if we shall have to confine our flying activities to the hours a lot of perishing birds don't want to occupy the atmosphere. An aircraft might as well fly into a brick wall as into heavyweight poultry on this scale."

By the end of a quarter of an hour, however, the fighting had ceased, and, Biggles was relieved to note, the mist was beginning to thin. Visibility improved slowly, and they were just finishing breakfast when from the distance came the sound for which they had been waiting—the drone of aero engines. Ruling out anything in the way of coincidence it could only be the Ranger. Hurrying to the Birada's radio Biggles sent out the signal.

That it had been picked up became evident when the big aircraft came nearer, although the mist was still too thick for it to be seen.

It so happened that the Ranger did not have long to wait, although to Biggles, in his anxiety—for everything depended on the machine getting down safely—it was long enough. Quite suddenly the mist began to lift, thinning as it rose. A shaft of watery sunshine struck through it; an area of pale blue sky appeared, and like magic the air was clear except for a few swiftly dispersing clouds. The drone of the engines overhead died away and the Ranger appeared like a great, grey wraith, nosing its way cautiously towards the placid surface of the lake. Biggles ran out a little way, for nowhere near the island was

the water very deep, and waved a towel. Then, as the Ranger turned towards the spot he returned to the shore to await its arrival.

"Not so bad after all," was the way he expressed his relief to Mayne as the Ranger made a good landing and surged on towards the island. He signalled it to the mooring that had been prepared for it.

Another minute and the big machine had nosed its way into its reedy anchorage. The engines died, and Algy. Ginger and Bertie, looking incongruous in their Oriental "tog-gery"—as Bertie had called it—stepped ashore.

"All hands help to cover the wings with reeds," ordered Biggles. "I've plenty cut."

"But here, I say old boy, what about a spot of brekker first?" protested Bertie, regarding Biggles reproachfully through his monocle. "We started at a ghastly hour and the old tummy feels a- bit emptyish—if you get what I mean?"

"You'll have all day to fill it," answered Biggles. "And you'd better take that window out of your face. It doesn't go with the rest of you."

"But I shall be lost—absolutely lost—without it," complained Bertie.

"You're more likely to be lost with it, if anyone sees you," was Biggles' uncompromising reply. "Get cracking."

The Ranger was soon made snug, and so bestrewn with reeds that detection, except from close range, would be practically impossible.

Over breakfast Algy stated that he had nothing to report. Everything had gone off all right, although the ground mist, when it formed suddenly, had him worried for a little while. "How are things here?" he inquired.

"Okay so far," answered Biggles. "We've seen nobody, and as far as we know nobody has seen us. We appear to

have the place to ourselves, but to be on the safe side everyone will keep back under the trees except when handling the aircraft. Remember, in clear weather this island can be seen from anywhere along this end of the lake. Everything is dead still, so a movement of any sort would attract the attention of any odd native who happened to be on the prowl.



If we're spotted, this place as a hide-out would be finished, and it would be a tricky business now, trying to move to another. How long we shall be here depends of course on how things fall out, but the sooner we get mobile the sooner we shall be away.

Sharing the island with us is a real tough line in mosquitoes that should encourage everyone to put his best foot forward. You'll realise what I mean when the sun goes down. Meanwhile, we're all set to begin operations."

"In that case let's get started," suggested Algy. "What's the programme? Have you worked it out yet?"

"More or less," answered Biggles. "Obviously, our first job is to locate the enemy camp—assuming that there is one. We can do nothing until we've confirmed it and know exactly where it is. To start blundering about on foot in this sort of country is out of the question. If it's here, or hereabouts, a single air reconnaissance should reveal it. There's no reason why that shouldn't be done to-day—right away, in fact. I shall do it, taking Ginger with me. The rest will stay here, get the place shipshape and watch for any movement on the mainland. You'd better know exactly what I intend to do, in case things come unstuck. The supposed position of the kidnappers' dump is about thirty miles due east from us. When I take off I shall head north, to make a wide detour before swinging round to approach the objective from behind; so, as I pass over it. I shall be already on course for home. I shall fly straight on, having a good look, of course, while Ginger takes a strip of photos so that we can study the layout of the place in our own time. Having no map, the photos should be useful when it comes to the foot-slogging part of the operation. Having got the photos I shall wander about a bit like a lost first-soloist, so I may arrive back here from any direction.

"And then what?" inquired Bertie.

Biggles smiled faintly. "Having located the enemy dump, all we have to do is march to it, collect our men, return here and then fly home—but I have a feeling that it won't be quite as easy as that. We'll plan our next move when we know what we have to cope with. Of course, the objective may be well hidden, and hard to find; but we'll try the simple way first. That's enough for the moment. All right, Ginger. I'm ready when you are."

"What happens if this trip comes unstuck?" inquired Algy. "I mean, in case of a forced landing, or anything of that sort. What do you want

me to do?"

Biggles shrugged his shoulders. "Ginger and I ought to be able to work our way back here. I've got a pocket compass, and with a few biscuits in our pockets we should be all right for a day or two. If all goes well we should be back inside a couple of hours. If we'

re not, you'll know something unforeseen has happened; but don't get in a flap, and don't be in too big a hurry to do something. Give me a day or two. On no account put the big machine in the air, except to go home. Without the transport it's unlikely that any of us would ever get home. If by any chance we don't turn up you'll have to use your own initiative about what to do."

Algy nodded. "Good enough."

Followed by Ginger, Biggles walked down to the edge of the lake and surveyed the shore, and the land beyond as far as it could be seen, for any sign of life. But there was none, so the Birada was cleared of its camouflage and the crew took their places.

Finding a parachute in his seat, Ginger asked: "Do we really want these things?"

"As they're here we might as well wear them," answered Biggles casually. "We're not heavily loaded and they may come in useful. One never knows. By the way, don't take photos until I give the word. I want to get a good vertical strip of the far end of the long lake. You can use the oblique camera to take shots of anything that strikes you as suspicious."

"Okay."

The engine came to life, and in a few minutes the Birada was on its way to perform the duty for which it had been brought.

From the air, in broad daylight. Ginger watched a strange panorama unfold itself to his view, half water, half land, unmarked by a road of any sort, or, as far as he could see, a human habitation. On all sides stretched a seemingly endless succession of lakes, lakes of all shapes and sizes, many connected by rivers and brooks that meandered through vast plains of reeds. Only on the higher ground was there any actual forest, and this mostly occurred in areas seldom exceeding a few square miles. Patches of jungle on occasional knolls might have been the backs of prehistoric monsters afloat on an emerald sea, for across the plains passed wave after wave as the tall grasses and rushes

bent under the pressure of a fitful breeze. There were mountains in the distance. The foothills, gashed by mysterious gorges, came down to meet the plains.

Biggles, as he had planned, first headed northward, a course which he held for some twenty minutes before swinging round to the east, and finally south, in a wide detour that would bring him over the estimated position of his objective, which, according to the rough sketch map drawn on the head of the Orochon, lay at the extremity of an arm outflung from a lake of exceptional size and peculiar shape. This lake—or so Ginger took it to be—had been in sight for some time, filling almost the whole of the eastern skyline.

Indeed, it was now possible to see that this sheet of water occupied the centre of what was in fact a vast basin, perhaps a hundred miles across, hemmed in on all sides by mountains, now dwarfed by distance, but, Ginger imagined, in reality high enough to form an almost insuperable barrier to any vehicle but an aircraft.

Biggles, apparently, also assumed the lake to be the one with which they were concerned, for cruising quietly at two thousand feet he worked his way towards its western extremity where it was now possible to observe, there occurred just such a long narrow arm as was depicted on the map. Finally he turned on a new course that would take him directly over it, at the same time speaking to Ginger over the inter-com "Use your eyes and stand by to take photos," he said crisply. "This is it—or should be."

Ginger was already looking, searching the ground with trained eyes for signs of human habitation. He knew what to look for. He did not expect to see roads or conspicuous buildings; nor did he; but where people move about regularly over the same ground there come into existence tracks that are visible from the air, if not from the ground.

There might be smoke from cooking fires, washed clothes left out to dry, and rubbish tips. If, as the Orochon had indicated, trees had been felled there should be some sign of that, too. He saw none of these things. All he could see was the calm surface of the lake, bounded sometimes by the eternal reeds and sometimes by wide areas of jungle.

The machine droned on, turning neither to right nor left, bringing the picture ever closer.

Bending over the side of the aircraft Ginger had just convinced himself

that there was nothing there, and that they had come to the wrong place when he saw a small, dark-coloured blob move swiftly from one spot to another, and then stop. It might have been a bear, or some other animal. In the ordinary way, without reason to pay particular interest, it was unlikely that he would have given the thing a second glance. As it was he watched closely, and when he saw a microscopic white spot appear against the darker background he knew that it was the face of a human being looking up at him. Then, suddenly, it was no longer there. But this only confirmed what Ginger suspected. Thus can the folly and curiosity of one man destroy the most deceptive camouflage ever designed.

"There's someone down there," he said over the intercom.

"I saw him," answered Biggles. "Okay. Start taking."

Ginger applied himself to his cameras, taking photo after photo as the aircraft passed on even keel over the suspected area. Between vertical shots he took an occasional snap, with a "pistol" camera, at several angles, covering particularly the area where he had seen the movement.

The machine droned on, and gradually the objective fell away behind.

Said Biggles: "Did you see anything?"

"Only the one man."

"Then you didn't notice the trench?"

"Trench? No."

"There was a straight black line, with squared-off ends, between two patches of jungle. I took it to be a trench. I can't think what else it could be. Anyway, straight lines don't occur in nature, so there's something there. You should have the thing in your photos so we'll have another look at it presently. We'll get along home."

The Birada went on. There had been no opposition, anyhow, thought Ginger, not without satisfaction. Nevertheless, he stood up to get a clear view beyond the rudder in case there was anything more to be seen. There was, but it was not on the ground, and it was on the ground, naturally, that his attention was concentrated. It may have been that a movement caught his eye. At any rate, something made him look up; and there, perhaps a mile distant, a single black spot moved against an infinity of blue. Ginger blinked and looked again,

thinking it might be an eagle, or one of the larger hawks. But no. The silhouette was unmistakable. The spot was an aircraft, a monoplane, head on, well above and following them.

"Watch out, Biggles! " he warned sharply. "There's a bandit behind us."

"Which way is he travelling?"

"He's following us, and coming in fast."

"Recognise the type?"

"No. It's a fighter by its cut. Painted black. Can't see any markings."

"Okay." Biggles' voice was quite calm.

The sinister pursuer came on, swiftly closing the gap.

"What are you going to do?" demanded Ginger, in a voice brittle with alarm. "This chap means business." He asked the question because the stranger was clearly a high-performance fighter, whereas their own machine, being a trainer type, carried no armament of any sort. There could, therefore, be no question of combat. Nor could the Birada hope to escape by running. Biggles had selected it for the very reason of its slow speed, robust construction and easy manoeuvrability, qualities which in view of the conditions in which it would have to operate were to be preferred to high speed and fighting performance.

Biggles' answer to Ginger's question was: "It all depends on what he does. If he only intends to follow us we'll take him for a tour round the landscape. If he comes for us I shall have to go down. Get the cameras under your arm and be ready to jump."

"To what?"

"Jump. We've got to save the photos. If we lose them we may never get another chance to get a fresh set. Don't bother about me. The thing is to get the cameras back to base."

Biggles' voice was now terse.

"Okay," acknowledged Ginger in a resigned voice.

In the short time occupied by this conversation the relative positions of the two machines had altered considerably. The black fighter had increased its speed and was coming in, nose down, from the flank. Biggles, while ostensibly still on his course, was side-slipping away

from it, and clear of the lake, towards a grass-covered steppe broken by numerous groups or copses of heavy timber.

The end came suddenly, but Biggles, old at the tricks of his trade, watching the stranger in his reflector, was ready. He swerved, and only just in time, for almost simultaneously came the grunting snarl of multiple machine guns. A stream of tracer bullets, intended for the Birada, flashed behind its tail unit. Biggles continued to turn, banking steeply to pass under the attacking machine, which, in consequence, overshot, and had to make a complete turn to resume its attack.

For an instant the Birada came to even keel. At the same time Biggles' voice came over the inter-com in a single staccato word, "Jump!"

Ginger, ready, did not hesitate. With the cameras under his left arm he launched himself into space.

By the time the parachute had opened, and he was able to look around, the two machines were some distance away, the fighter turning in a tight circle to bring its guns to bear on a target, which, twisting and turning—although, as Ginger realised, under perfect control—dropped ever nearer to the ground.

He did not see the end of the affair, being too taken up with his own position which was not without its hazards. Fortunately there was little wind, but looking down to see where he was going feared that he must collide with some small trees. In the event a puff of wind just saved him; he missed the trees by a narrow margin and made a touchdown in the long grass by which they were surrounded. He fell, but was up again in a moment, releasing himself and then swiftly piling the billowing silk into a ball for easy transport so that he could get it out of sight. With the cameras under one arm and the "brolly"

under the other, he dived into the trees. Putting his burden in a safe position he dashed



*Ginger launched himself into space——*

out into the open to see how the one-sided combat had ended. In the last few hectic seconds of his descent he had been aware of sporadic bursts of fire, so he was not surprised when, just as he ran clear, there came the horrible, tearing, rending noise of a crashing aircraft. By the time he was quite clear of the trees there was only one machine in the air. It was the black fighter.

The matter did not end there. With a sinking feeling in his stomach

Ginger watched the fighter roar down and rake its now stationary target with long bursts of fire. From the spot, into the air rolled a coiling cloud of black smoke. Only then, as if satisfied, did the fighter turn away. Either by accident or design it turned towards the place where Ginger, as if rooted to the ground by horror, was standing in full view. Perceiving his folly, having a pretty good idea of what to expect, Ginger flung himself back under the trees.

Nor did he stop at the fringe, but bored his way through the undergrowth to the root of a giant oak, at the foot of which, on the far side, he flung himself flat. An instant later, through the copse came such a shattering hail of metal that he was appalled by the din it made. Branches and bark were ripped from the trees. Clods of earth sprang into the air.

Hearing the fighter roar low overhead, acting under the sheer impulse of self-preservation, he reversed his position to still keep the tree between himself and the aircraft. Again came the withering blast.

Four times this happened. Ginger knew that the pilot couldn't see him, so apparently he was spraying the whole copse in the hope of killing him. Finally, either because he had used up all his ammunition, or possibly because he thought he had done enough, the fighter made off. As the noise of its engine receded, Ginger, white and shaken, picked himself up, and in a sort of frenzy raced for the spot where the Birada had crashed. There was no difficulty in finding it for it was still burning fiercely.

He was still running, dry-lipped and wild-eyed, when a voice near at hand said: "Where do you think you're going?"

Spinning round with a gasp he saw Biggles sitting on a fallen tree, smoking a cigarette.

A SIGHT TO REMEMBER

"THEN he didn't get you after all!" cried Ginger, almost overcome with relief.

"Doesn't look like it, does it?" returned Biggles. "How on earth did you get away with it?"

"In the first place, probably, because the chap in the other machine hasn't had much practice."

"You didn't jump?"



"By the time you were clear I was too low. Moreover, had I jumped he would have plastered me as I went down. As it was I preferred to remain mobile. He just couldn't hit me, that's all there was to it. Had I tried to land in the long grass I should have done a somersault, so I flattened out over it and headed for the trees. I took a gap between two of them. My wings went, of course, but they absorbed most of the shock. I've collected a bruise or two, but nothing to worry about. By the time our friend in the black kite could bring his guns to bear I was forty yards away, behind the thickest tree I could find."

"Same here," said Ginger, with feeling.

"Have you got the cameras safe?"

"Yes. They're in the trees, with the broolly."

"Fine. Where did the machine come from—did you see?"

"No. I happened to look up, and there he was."

"Well, there was no sign of an airfield yet he must have been pretty close all the time. I imagine he's got a roosting place under the trees somewhere. He's not alone there, either.

It's a pity about the Birada, but it served its purpose so we can't complain."

Ginger found a seat beside Biggles on the log, for now that reaction had set in his legs were a trifle shaky. "It looks as if we've got a nice long walk home," he observed. "How far have we to go, do you think?"

"About twelve miles, as near as one can judge. Even taking it easy we ought to be home before dark."

Ginger looked at the smoking remains of the Birada. "What a mess," he muttered. "But there is this about it. We know the enemy camp is here all right, or they wouldn't have air protection."

"Unfortunately, they also know we're here," Biggles pointed out.

"They knew that when we flew over the place."

"Of course," agreed Biggles. "They may have taken us for a lost Chinaman, but they weren't taking any chances.

If that's what they thought they'll try to confirm it." "How?"

"Well, obviously, they won't be content to leave things as they are. Not likely. As soon as the pilot gets home—and he's probably home by now—a search party will be sent out to look at us if we're dead, or find us if we're alive. As no corpses will be available for inspection they'll know that we escaped, in which case they'll soon be after us. They won't

want a Chinese pilot to go home to report that he was shot down in this area by an unknown aircraft. No fear. Someone might come out to investigate, and that's the last thing they want."

"That being so, don't you think we ought to be moving off?" suggested Ginger.

"On the contrary, I was thinking of staying here for a bit," returned Biggles.

Ginger stared. "Are you kidding?" Trust Biggles, he thought, to do the unexpected.

A ghost of a smile hovered over Biggles' lips. "No. My first inclination, like yours, was to push along right away, to get a good start. Then it struck me that this might be an admirable opportunity to have a closer look at some of the people we're up against. So far we don't even know their nationality. I decided that you should trot along home with the cameras, but on second thoughts, as the day is still young, it seems safer to keep together."

Ginger looked doubtful. "By staying here we're taking a chance."

"One seldom gets anywhere without taking a chance," argued Biggles. "One look at these people would tell us a lot. Raymond would give his ears for that information, even if we got no more."

"You think they'll come?"

"I'm pretty sure of it. They must be as anxious to see us as we are to see them. They should be on their way here by now. Obviously, it'll take them some time to get here, but even so, we ought to be home by nightfall."

"Where are we going to hide?"

"What's wrong with a nice big tree? As a hiding-place a tree isn't exactly an original notion, but it's still a good one."

"Okay," agreed Ginger. "Let's find a comfortable perch."

"Plenty of time," said Biggles. "Let's see what's left of the machine."

Getting up they walked along to where the Birada was just burning itself out. Nothing remained but the engine and the metal members of the airframe. Certainly there was nothing that would furnish the enemy with information.

Biggles shrugged. "Ah well. It shows of this sort these accidents will happen," he remarked. "I'd like to know who made the type that shot us down."

"Then you didn't recognise it?"

"No, and I was pretty close to it—a bit too close—once or twice. I've never seen that particular machine before, I'm certain—not that there was anything remarkable about it.

The general lines were quite orthodox. There were no markings—at least, I couldn't see any."

Turning away, they walked back to where Ginger had left the cameras and the parachute.

These were retrieved, and with the burden shared, they retraced their steps to that part of the copse which held trees most suitable for their purpose. There were several from which to choose. The only essential qualification was that it should overlook the scene of the crash, for this, said Biggles, was sure to be the object of greatest interest to the search party, assuming that one came.

A tree, a massive walnut with spreading branches, was soon selected, after which all that remained to be done was find comfortable positions in it.

Ginger went up first, taking with him a long line made from the shrouds of the parachute, which, having served its purpose, was not worth the labour of carrying back to base.

With the line he hauled up the camera, and then used it to fasten them securely in a crutch. Biggles, still on the ground, cut the fabric into pieces, the purpose of which—

apart from disposing of it—was to provide a softer seat than a bare

branch could offer.

Ginger settled himself in the junction of three branches, about thirty feet from the ground, which commanded a view, through a leafy screen, of the burnt-out machine.

Biggles chose a similar position some twenty feet away from him. Each ate a biscuit.

After that there was nothing to do but wait. The time, Ginger noted, was still only a little after eleven o'clock.

As the sun climbed to its zenith the air became sultry even in the shady heart of the tree.

For a long time the only sounds were the twittering of birds and the drowsy hum of insects. To pass the time, Ginger, who could see the lake from his elevated position, amused himself by counting the different kinds of wading birds standing on the edge of the glassy water. Once a small brown bear caused a diversion by grubbing about under the leaves as he wandered on his way.

It was nearly two hours before anything important occurred to break the monotony of the vigil. Then to Ginger's ears came a strange chattering that puzzled him not a little.

The sound came, not from the direction of the enemy camp, but the other way. However, in a few minutes the problem solved itself when into the clearing in which the wrecked machine lay stepped two figures dressed so like himself that for a moment Ginger thought that Algy and Bertie had arrived. Each carried a large, apparently heavy bag.

Then the obvious truth struck him. The men were two genuine Korean traders. The chattering broke out in a fresh burst of conversation as the men caught sight of the smouldering aircraft to which, possibly, they had been attracted by the thin column of smoke that still rose into the air. Anyhow, they put down their bags and walked round the wreck talking volubly although, of course, Ginger had no idea of what the conversation was about. They seemed surprised—as well they might be—by the character of their discovery. Neither appeared to be armed—anyhow, not with firearms—and for the rest they looked harmless enough. What they were doing in the region if, as it seemed, the inhabitants had fled, he could not imagine. He concluded that either they were unaware of this or had lost their way. Finally, to his dismay, they sat down on the very log which he and Biggles had

recently vacated, and like two children at a picnic proceeded to eat a meal. It was evident that they were blissfully unaware that they were in any sort of danger.

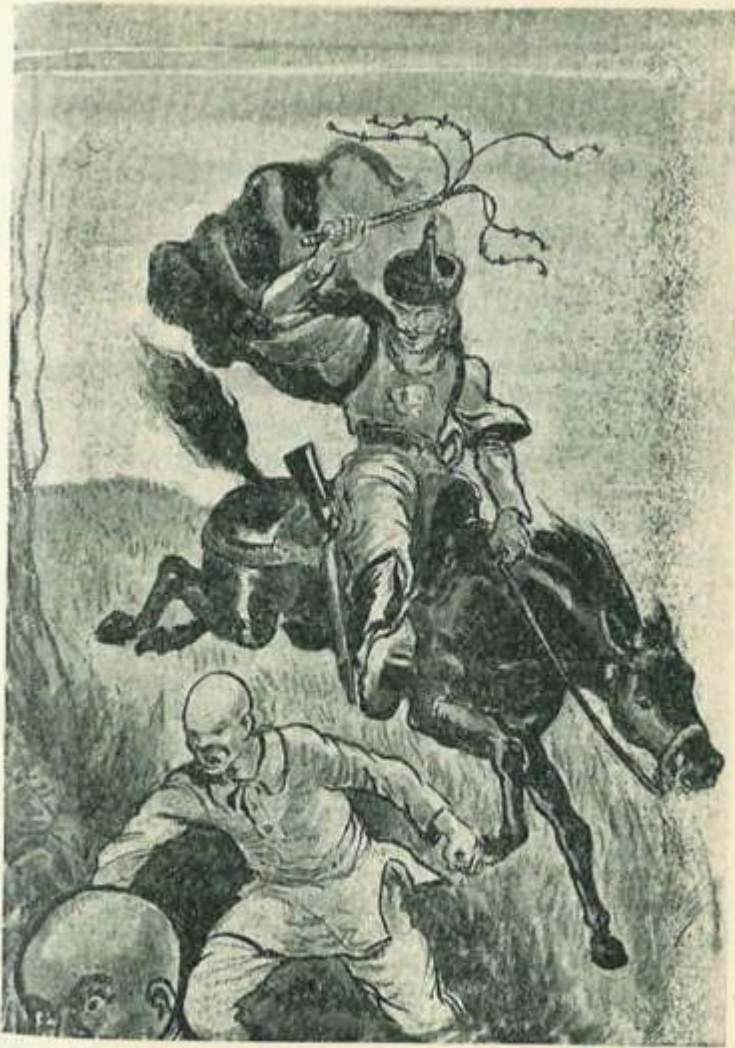
Ginger caught Biggles' eye. Biggles made a movement with his hands as much as to say there was nothing they could do about it. Anyway, thought Ginger, since neither he nor Biggles could speak a language likely to be understood, no good purpose would be served by revealing themselves. It might make matters worse. Left alone the travellers would soon be on their way. At least, he could only hope so. What would happen if the search party arrived and found them there was a matter for speculation.

This, in fact, is what did happen, and in the event the outcome was worse, much worse, than anything he could have imagined.

Biggles was right in his prediction that a search party would be sent out to examine the crashed aircraft. Its approach was announced by a jangle and clatter of accoutrements which brought the Koreans to their feet in attitudes of alarm. They started to run, but they were too late. Round the end of the trees swept at full gallop a party of horsemen of such wild and picturesque appearance that Ginger's eyes went round with astonishment.

The spectacle reminded him of a picture he had once seen in a book, of an incident in some barbaric war of olden days. There was no military order. Each rider rode his sweating beast as and how he pleased. Most of them carried rifles, although great curved swords banged against the saddle-flaps.

Only one of the men, who rode a little apart, appeared to be a European, and even he, in a tight-fitting, high-collared shirt crossed by bandoliers, and a round lambskin cap on his head, was a romantic figure. The rest were Asiatics with brownish-yellow, slab-like faces, and narrow slanting eyes. Most of them wore drooping black moustaches, some with a wisp of black hair on the chin. Ginger, searching his memory, in a vague sort of way took them to be Mongolians, or Tartars—he wasn't sure which, if, in fact, there was



*Brandishing his whip he bore down on them*

any difference. As his eyes went automatically to the leader he drew in his breath sharply as he called to mind a scrap of information furnished by Mayne. According to the Orochon messenger the slave-master was a large, cross-eyed Mongolian. As there could hardly be two such men in the district, thought Ginger, this must be he. Certainly he answered to the description, and a more villainous-looking creature he had never seen.

The man, who literally dwarfed his belathered mount, bristled with weapons; yet even so, in his right hand he flourished a whip with several tails, each with knots at intervals.

Watching this amazing scene a strange feeling crept over Ginger that time had somehow slipped back several centuries; that he was living in another age, the age when the hordes of Gengis Khan rode the earth on a wave of blood and horrors unspeakable. He had no idea that such people still existed.

There was, however, little time to reflect upon this aspect of the situation. The big Mongol saw the two Koreans at once, as he was bound to, and with a yell of triumph, clapping spurs already bloodstained into the flanks of his wretched horse, brandishing his whip he bore down on them. The knotted thongs curled round the legs of the nearest fugitive, who, with a scream of pain and terror, fell headlong. An instant later his companion shared a like fate. As if this were not enough the whip continued to rise and fall on the squirming Koreans who had no means of defending themselves. During this ghastly display of sheer brutality the rest of the mob dismounted, and standing in a circle roared with laughter as if the thing was a great joke. The European seemed quite disinterested. Dismounting, he walked over to the crash and proceeded to make an examination of the wreckage.

To Ginger, sitting petrified with horror in his tree, the whole thing was incredible. That any man could inflict such barbaric treatment on his worst enemy would have been a thing to marvel at, but that he should so treat two inoffensive merchants who had done him no injury of any sort was simply beyond his understanding. Clearly, the man was not human. Ginger derived a crumb of comfort from the cold butt of his automatic, which he determined to use without the slightest compunction should he be discovered. In no circumstances would he fall into the hands of such devils alive; the first man to die, he decided grimly, would be the monstrous Mongol. He glanced across at Biggles; but Biggles' face was expressionless and gave no indication of what he was thinking. What astonished Ginger as much as anything was that a white man, apparently a European, should make no attempt to stop this display of bestial brutality. But his examination of the aircraft concluded, the man's only interest seemed to be in the contents of a bottle which he had taken from his pocket.

The flogging only ended when the two miserable Koreans lost consciousness, or died—

Ginger did not know which. The horsemen spent a little time examining the copse, drinking from black bottles which they all seemed to carry, and then remounted. The unconscious Koreans were slung like empty sacks across the backs of two spare horses with their hands and feet tied together to prevent them falling off. Their bags were then tied on with them, and the party, with the reckless abandon of a mob of madmen, rode off as it had arrived, at full gallop.

Not until the thud of hoofs and the jangle of harness had died away did Ginger move.

Actually, he felt physically sick. Stretching stiff limbs he looked across at Biggles and said: "You wanted to see the sort of men we were up against. Well, now you've seen them, and I hope you enjoyed it. I wish I hadn't seen them. That picture will haunt me for the rest of my days." He shook his head. "I still don't understand it."

"At least we know what to expect if they get their hands on us," answered Biggles quietly, as he prepared to descend. "Mayne was certainly right when he said the country was uncivilised. No wonder the local folks have flitted. But I'll tell you this," he went on in a hard voice. "That big lout, who must I think be the reincarnation of Attila himself, has something coming to him. No man can behave like that and get away with it indefinitely. One day his chickens will come home to roost. I hope I shall be there to see them. Let's get out of this."

"They didn't spend much time looking for us," said Ginger as they climbed down.

"The same thought struck me," replied Biggles. "I can only think that they assume that those two unlucky Koreans were the crew of the machine. I know that doesn't sound very intelligent, but those creatures weren't normal human beings, with brains. They were beasts with the mental equipment of beasts. And after all, the pilot who saw you jump must have reported that a Korean occupied the back seat of the plane. He wasn't to know otherwise. So, in a way, the curiosity of those unfortunate travellers did us a good turn.

They will, I suppose, end their days in slavery. So shall we, if we slip up. It's worth bearing in mind."

"I'm not likely to forget it," returned Ginger.

Biggles looked at the cameras. "I don't think there's any need to lug all this weight back home," he observed. "Seems a pity to abandon them, but in an affair like this one must reckon on a certain amount of



wastage."

Ginger nodded. "If we ran into trouble they'd only be in the way."

"And if we should collide with the enemy he'd know just what we were doing," went on Biggles. "Without the Birada we couldn't use the camera again, anyway. All we need is the film packs. I'll take them out and put the cameras out of sight." This he did, the work occupying only a few minutes. The films he put in a pocket under his shirt. "That's all, I think," he said, looking round.

"I hope you know the way home," remarked Ginger.

"I've a compass, but I don't think we shall need it," replied Biggles. "It's no great distance to our own lake. Once we strike it, we have only to follow the edge to come within sight of the island."

"Okay," said Ginger. "Let's go. We shall have to watch out we don't get bogged."

"That's not the only thing we shall have to watch out for," asserted Biggles. "What frightens me a lot more than bogs are these infernal pitfalls Mayne told us about. A bog usually gives you warning, and a chance to get back. A neatly covered hole in the ground doesn't. I should hate to end up impaled on a spike like a spatchcocked snipe. I'd almost as soon walk through a mine-field. If you step on a mine you don't know anything about it. Wait a minute though, talking of mines gives me an idea. I don't see why a couple of long sticks, to prod doubtful ground in front of us, shouldn't serve as mine detectors—or rather, pit detectors."

"I should put my feet down with a lot more confidence if I knew the ground in front of me was solid," declared Ginger.

"Actually, I don't think there's much risk of finding any hollow spots in this particular area," opined Biggles. "If there were, that crew of Mongolian thugs would know about it, in which case, even if they were drunk—and I think most of them were—they wouldn't charge about at a

maniac gallop. All the same, we'll play safe. Stand fast while I cut a couple of poles. It won't take a minute."

Two bamboos about eight feet long were soon procured, and the march home began.

## STRANGE ENCOUNTERS

IN different circumstances Ginger would have enjoyed the walk, for the country, and the wild life that occupied it, was unlike anything he had seen before. The thought struck him that in the past much of the earth's surface must have been like this. At any rate, here was a place where the centuries had marked time while the rest of the world marched on.

Game was everywhere. Pheasants, snipe and wildfowl rose at every step. Deer were seen frequently, and occasionally, in the trees, animals of the sable family. Once, some wild boars with much snorting rushed away from where they had been grubbing for roots of some sort. But of dangerous game none was seen.

Some miles had been covered before the first sign of human handiwork appeared, and this served as a reminder to them to be on their guard. An appalling stench assailed their nostrils. Investigating, they came upon the very thing which they had most cause to fear—a pitfall. The covering had caved in. At the bottom, in a state of decomposition, was a large bear.

"There is this about it," remarked Biggles as they walked on, examining the ground in front of them with renewed caution, "that trap proves that the local people have departed, otherwise the hunters who went to the trouble of digging it would have collected the poor beast that fell into it."

By midday the air was quivering with heat, and soon afterwards a halt was made at a spring of water, where the remainder of the day's rations were eaten. Wild cherries from a nearby tree supplemented a dull meal. A short distance away a pink flamingo, as grave as a judge, watched the intruders with suspicion.

They were, Biggles estimated, getting on for ten miles on their way when the country became more park-like in character, and the ruins of primitive huts began to make their appearance. An occasional ear of wheat suggested that in the not very distant past some of the ground had been cultivated. In a glade, Ginger's pole, which he had been using automatically and rather carelessly, suddenly encountered no resistance, and he almost fell into one of the pits its purpose was to reveal. Soon afterwards Biggles discovered another, so it was evident that they were now in the region of them. The result of this was to retard progress considerably for, as Biggles pointed out, the fact that the traps had not been visited for a long time made them all the more

dangerous; for over them leaves and grasses had been blown until by the eye alone it was impossible to detect them.

Rounding the end of some scrub, with their own lake now on their left hand, they came suddenly upon a deserted village of crude log huts chinked with clay. Nearly all of them were more or less in a state of dilapidation, so that disregarding a significant silence it was evident, even from a distance, that the place was abandoned. The huts were set in two rough lines some twenty yards apart, but grass and wild flowers now flourished in what might once have been called the village "street". Biggles and Ginger walked on slowly, for even in this wild spot there was something pathetic about the forsaken homes.

It was tragic, thought Ginger moodily, that even here the ambitions of a mere handful of men could make life intolerable.

From these sombre thoughts he was jerked abruptly by Biggles' hand falling on his arm and gripping it. Looking up, startled, he saw that Biggles' eyes were on the ground, at a spot where there was a soft patch of mud. Looking at this he saw what it was that had attracted Biggles' attention. Clearly defined in the mud was the imprint of a great paw.

"Tiger," murmured Biggles. "He came this way not long ago. He must be just in front of us. Keep your eyes skinned."

They walked on, looking about them, and had reached a spot about half-way through the village, when, a short distance ahead. Ginger's eyes fell on a spectacle as curious—not to say alarming—as could have been imagined. It was the tiger; but far from appearing in the furtive slinking posture in which this animal is usually depicted, it lay across the threshold of one of the huts, looking out with its head resting on its paws in the manner of a common cat. Even as Ginger watched, with his heart thumping uncomfortably, the animal moved its head slightly and he knew that it had seen them. For a minute the treat striped beast regarded the two humans quizzically, its mouth half open, which gave it almost an expression of surprise. Then, rising to its feet it walked slowly towards them.

There was, so far at any rate, nothing hostile about its general behaviour. Its impulse, if appearances were anything to go by, was mere 'curiosity. All the same, the idle curiosity of a tiger at close quarters can be disconcerting; at least, Ginger found it so. and the pistol that he took from his pocket, his only means of defence, felt utterly futile for the occasion.

"Don't move," said Biggles softly.

Hardly had the words left his lips when, in a moment of time, the situation was transformed in a manner as dramatic as it was unexpected. The sultry silence was shattered by the report of a heavy weapon somewhere close at hand. Simultaneously, with a terrifying roar, the tiger leapt straight into the air and went over backwards. It was on its feet again in an instant, snarling horribly and biting at its side. Then, with a ferocious growling noise deep in its throat, which Ginger thought was the most frightening sound he had ever heard, it charged. The extraordinary thing was, it did not charge the two men standing in plain view. It went straight across the street towards one of the other huts, at the doorway of which now appeared the man who obviously had fired the shot, for he carried a double-barrelled rifle. The man stepped out. He would, thought Ginger, have been better advised to stay inside and shut the door.

Ginger's criticism of the man's behaviour turned to admiration when he saw with what unconcern he stood up to the charge. Quite calmly and deliberately he raised the rifle to his shoulder, and at point-blank range gave the tiger the second barrel. The bullet went home, and again the tiger was knocked over, but even though hard hit the great cat was not yet finished. Half dragging itself it still strove to reach its enemy who, without retreating a yard, dropped the now useless weapon on the grass and with a shout of defiance whipped out a dagger. How he would have fared with a weapon so inadequate was never put to the test, for at this juncture Biggles ran forward and from a distance of inches put a bullet into the tiger's ear, and so into its brain. The beast rolled over and lay still.

Ginger, who during the few seconds occupied by this crisis had remained motionless, a fascinated spectator, hurried forward to where Biggles was face to face with the most remarkable figure of a man he had ever seen. As a type he was something entirely new, something that might have appeared on the stage, or the screen, in the part of a complete vagabond. He was tall, stoutly-built, dark of complexion and full-bearded, and although he was clad only in the rags of what had once been a uniform, he bristled with vitality.

Indeed, there was a poise about him, a self-confidence that amounted almost to a swagger, that would have commanded respect anywhere. How long it was since his hair and beard had made the acquaintance of a pair of scissors was a matter for surmise. Dark eyes, alert and challenging, were deeply set between high cheek-bones, and although his skin was weather-tanned it carried a curious pallor. One cheek was

badly scarred. A heavy, old-fashioned rifle, which he had picked up and reloaded with the slick dexterity of long practice, hung in the crook of his arm. A cartridge belt, from which the brass cases protruded, encircled his waist. He seemed not in the least perturbed by what to most people would have been a hair-raising experience.

An odd situation now developed. The man instead of looking kindly upon Biggles, who had probably saved his life, glared in frank hostility as he rapped out a remark in a language which, not surprisingly, was unknown to those to whom it was addressed.

Biggles smiled, and as it seemed in order to say something, and not knowing what else to say replied casually, in English: "Sorry, but I don't understand." He did not expect to be understood. Indeed, as he told Ginger afterwards, had he thought there was the slightest chance of the man being able to speak English, he would not so readily have revealed his own nationality.

But the impact of the words on the bearded stranger was almost comical. He started. He stared. He frowned. He looked Biggles up and down. Then, in a rich sonorous voice he almost shouted: "I said what the devil do you mean by interfering with my tiger?"

lithe stranger had been astonished by Biggles' choice of language, Biggles was no less amazed at this reply in the same tongue. The same with Ginger who, moreover, in the light of what had happened thought this a strange way to express gratitude for being rescued from a nasty predicament.

"I'm sorry," said Biggles contritely. "I thought you were in some danger of being mauled, or "

"Danger! Pouf! Nothing of the sort, sir," shouted the man. "I can handle my own tigers."

Biggies shrugged. "Should the occasion be repeated I will bear it in mind," he said coldly.

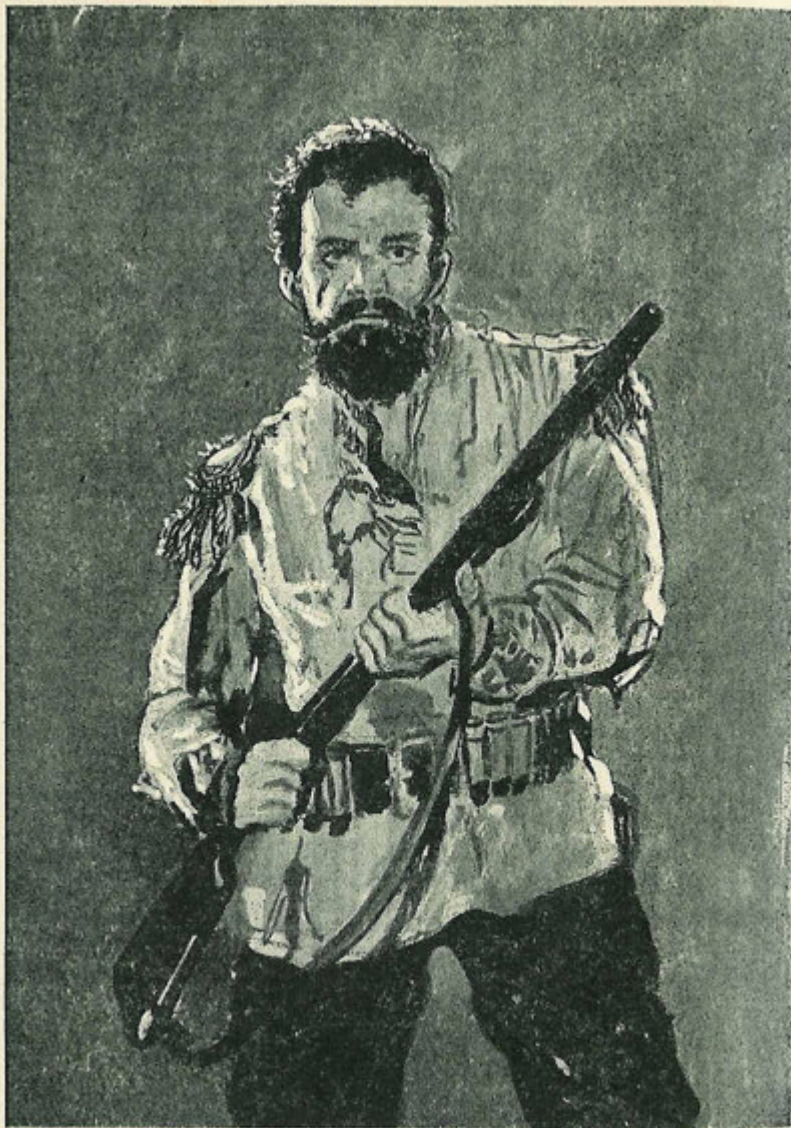
The man treated Biggles to a further scrutiny. "Why do you speak English?" he demanded. "How is this? What are you? Speak up before I shoot you."

Perceiving that no good purpose could be served by dissembling, Biggles took the bull by the horns as the quickest way of bringing matters to a head. "The answer to your question is this," he said. "We are British."

"Hm." The man pondered the statement, his eyes dark with suspicion. "Then what are you doing here and why do you wear those filthy rags?" he demanded.

"That," answered Biggles, "is my own affair. I might ask you the same question."

"Me?" The man struck his chest with a hand that ended in an upward flourish. "I am a Russian, and I don't care who knows it," said he, in a voice so loud that he obviously meant what he said for it could have been heard from one end of the village to the other.



*Colonel Alexis Petroffsky*

"When I say Russian I mean a true Russian, from St. Petersburg—which the rascals who now live there call Petrograd. Colonel Alexis Petroffsky, late of the Imperial Cavalry, now the Flail of God against the Bolsheviks, and the greatest killer of tigers in Eastern Asia."

Biggles smiled at this strange boast and the way in which it was made. "This beast nearly killed you," he reminded, touching the dead tiger with his foot.

"Pah! " scoffed Petroffsky airily. "You acted bravely, sir, I must admit, but in another instant my dagger would have been in the brute's throat, although, by the beard of St.

Peter, he was no ordinary beast. In his time not fewer than five hundred men, women and children has he taken to fill his stomach. Long have I stalked him, and long has he sought to add me to his collection, the only man left in Kossuri. He had the audacity to seek me here, on my own doorstep. Now he has paid for his folly. Still, he served you a good turn, for had he not appeared when he did, you would have been shot, not the tiger."

"Shot? By whom?" asked Biggles in surprise.

"By me—who else?"

"But why shoot me?"

"Here a man shoots anyone he does not know," declared the colonel. "It is the only way to live in peace," he added simply. "But who are you, and why do you wear these preposterous garments?"

"My name and my business here are matters which at the moment I prefer not to discuss,

" answered Biggles cautiously.

"Quite right," agreed Petroffsky. "A man should mind his own business. Pardon me for asking a question. How is London?"

"London was looking very well when I was last there," I returned Biggles. "Do you know London?"

"Do I know London?" The colonel appeared to be almost affronted by the question. "

Why, sir," he cried, "in the days when men were men, and gentlemen would fight to the death for a woman's glove, London was my home. 1 Everyone knew Petroffsky of the Russian Embassy." He. sighed. "Ah, what days they were."

By this time, of course, Biggles had the situation under control. So this was Alexis Petroffsky, the man who had acted as guide to Mayne on the occasion of his first visit. I No wonder Mayne called him an amazing fellow. He decided to test the ground a little further before letting the I Russian know that Mayne was in the country.



"You once, I think, acted as guide to a British officer I named Mayne, who came here on a hunting trip?" he prompted.

Petroffsky flung out an enthusiastic arm. "Mayne! Of course! An admirable companion, although as a hunter not up to my standard. A trifle—shall we say—squeamish? A rascally gun-bearer insulted us. I was for putting him to death, but Mayne objected.

Absurd. It is the only way to deal with such people. They're no use to anyone. Are you a hunter?"

"For what other purpose would a man come to this country?" parried Biggles.

"Why, indeed? But by the beard of St. Joseph, why do you wear these disgusting clothes?"

"We thought they would attract less attention," explained Biggles truthfully.

Petroffsky shook his head. "It is a sad thing to see a man ashamed of his clothes. For my part, my uniform will be removed only from my dead body. Koreans are the scum of the earth. True, I allow a few to pass because they bring me cartridges and vodka, without which life would not be worth living. Two came to-day, so thanks be to St. Thomas, I am stocked up again. Will you take a drink with me?" The colonel produced an enormous battered silver flask.

"It would be a pleasure to drink with you," answered Biggles, "but I think you'd better save it for yourself."

Petroffsky frowned. "Why?"

"Because you may get no more."

Petroffsky's frown deepened. "Why?"

"Two Koreans, you say, came to-day?"

"True."

"And they went that way?" Biggles pointed.

"Yes."

"A few hours ago they were set upon by a party of horsemen who beat

them nearly, if not quite, to death."

The colonel's face grew dark with anger. He cursed long and luridly. "Why did you allow this?" he demanded at last.

"I was sitting in a tree at the time," explained Biggles. "Was there any reason why you couldn't get down?" "I hadn't a rifle."

"You had a pistol."

"What is the use of a pistol against a score of madmen?" "You could at least have died like a man!"

"I did not, at the moment, feel like dying," said Biggles coldly. "Besides," he added, "the purpose of my visit did not include the protection of wandering vodka pedlars."

"But how the devil am I to get my vodka?" shouted Petroff sky.

"That, my dear sir, is your affair," replied Biggles. "The success or failure of your vodka supply is to me a matter of complete indifference and, may I add, if you go on bellowing like that there seems to be a good chance that we shall share the fate of your Korean liquor vendors."

"Me? Flogged? Ha ha." The colonel shouted with laughter. "That's a good one. Those rascals won't come here."

"Why not?"

"Because they're afraid of me, that's why. They know that Alexis Petroff sky fears no man. When I shoot I kill. Besides, they fear the pitfalls with which the land is beset."

"Apparently you know these ruffians?" prompted Biggles gently, in the hope of getting more information.

"Know them? Of course I know them!" shouted Petroffsky. "Devil's spawn, sir, that's what they are."

"I gather you live here, in this village?"

"Certainly. Which reminds me, why do we stand here? Come and join me in some refreshment."

The Russian strode off up the village a short distance to a house that was rather larger and in better condition than the rest.

Biggles and Ginger dropped a little behind. Said Ginger, softly: "What an incredible fellow."

"It's an incredible country," answered Biggles simply.

The interior of the house, when they reached it, was also incredible—or so Ginger thought. At first glance the room into which they were invited appeared to be a museum devoted to the collection of tiger skins. Skins hung on the walls and lay strewn on the floor. Tiger skins covered the ottoman that served in lieu of chairs. In fact, tiger skins were everywhere, giving the place a musty odour. They did, at least, thought Ginger, go far to confirm the Russian's boasting of his prowess as a hunter. There were at least a dozen guns and rifles of one sort or another, mostly old patterns, standing about. Broken boxes of ammunition lay in a heap on the floor. Empty cartridge cases stood in rows on the mantelpiece.

"Be seated, gentlemen," requested Petroff sky, producing glasses and a black bottle.

Biggles waved it aside. "Not for me, thank you," he said.

The Russian shrugged his shoulders. "As you will."

"You will not think us discourteous if we don't stay long," remarked Biggles. "We're still some way from camp. By the way, you'll be interested to know that your old friend Captain Mayne is with us."

Petroff sky, who was tossing back a glass of vodka, nearly choked. "By the beard of St.

Antony, that's wonderful news!" he cried. "I must go to him as soon as I have skinned the tiger. I live to kill tigers—and Bolsheviks. There is, I think, no better occupation. The Bolsheviks threw me into prison."

"Why?" replied Biggles.

The Russian drew himself up to his full height and laid a hand on his heart. "Because I, Alexis Petroff sky, refused to take orders from a crew of drunken revolutionaries who climbed into the Imperial Palaces over the dead bodies of my friends. They put me in prison—me, a Cossack, a colonel of the Imperial Guard and victor of a hundred duels with sword and pistol! But they couldn't keep me there, no, by the beard of St. Michael.

The night I escaped I slew six of them. I killed only six because there were no more."

Ginger listened in astonishment to this extraordinary recital. What to make of it he hardly knew. The man might be vainglorious, he thought, but there was a ring of truth in his words.

"Who are these men who flogged the Koreans?" asked Biggles, still seeking information.

"They looked like Mongolians."

"They are," asserted Petroff sky. "They do the dirty work for Prince Ling Soo. Prince!

Ha ha! He's nothing but a Manchurian bandit, a common soldier who deserted from the army and came here years ago. By robbery and murder he grew rich, and by employing more murderers brought the country under his control. Success has so gone to his head that he now boasts that he will conquer the whole world."

"Is that so?" murmured Biggles slowly, for the significance of this remark was not overlooked. "How does he intend to do that?"

Petroff sky made a disdainful gesture. "Who cares? Yet the man is certainly getting guns from somewhere. Strange rumours have reached me from farther up the country."

"Strange rumours have reached me, too," said Biggles, taking a chance.

The Russian did not miss the point. "Ha, so that's why you've come here? The British always had long ears for rumours. Well, you can rely on me for any help that I can give, for no one hates these stinking barbarians more than I do. You can see for yourself what they've done to the country?"

Biggles nodded. "Yes, I've seen." He got up. "But now we must be getting along or darkness will overtake us before we reach camp, and our friends will be getting anxious."

"Anxious? Why should they be anxious? Are you children?"

"Not exactly, but I promised to be back."

"Then you are right to go, for a man should always keep his word," averred Petroffsky. "

Where is your camp? I must call on you."

Biggles hesitated. This was not because he did not trust the man. Nor did he want to offend him, particularly as he might be a useful ally. On the other hand, he was afraid the Russian might make a nuisance of himself with his noisy braggadocio. In the end he took a chance and supplied the information. "We look forward to seeing you again," he said. "

But you will appreciate that it would not be to our advantage to have it known that we were here?"

Petroffsky bowed. "I understand perfectly, sir. Not a word of your presence here shall pass my lips. If there is one man in this devil's dustbin to be trusted, it is me. I, Alexis Petroffsky, am the soul of discretion. Are you sure you won't take a toothful of vodka before you go?"

"Quite sure, thanks."

The ex-Cossack's manner became wistful. "You will forgive me I trust for mentioning this matter so early in our acquaintance, but—er—you would not by any chance have —

er—any chocolate in your pocket?"

Biggles blinked. "Chocolate?"

"It is my one weakness," stated Petroffsky apologetically —and not entirely truthfully. "

All my life I have adored chocolate, and here, alas, none is to be had for love or gold."

Ginger could not repress a smile. The idea of this big bearded hermit of the wilds pining for sweets struck him as being incongruous to the point of being fantastic.

"I'm sorry I have none with me," answered Biggles seriously, perceiving that as far as the Russian was concerned this was no laughing matter. "But we have some in camp.

You shall have some when you call."

Petroffsky beamed. "Now you may be certain of seeing me soon," he declared. "Au revoir. Remember, my rifle is at your command."

"And my chocolate is at yours," returned Biggles, smiling. "Goodbye for now."

"Adieu. Keep to the edge of the rushes and you need not fear pitfalls."

Biggles and Ginger strode on. The rest of the march was made without incident. Just as darkness was bringing out the mosquitoes and fireflies, tired and travel-stained they reached the point of the waterside nearest to the island. A whistle brought over the canoe, and a few minutes later they were in camp, which, said Algy, had been in a fever of anxiety about them. A substantial meal had been prepared, and over it, for the best part of an hour they were kept busy recounting the details of the day's adventures.

Mayne, of course, was intrigued by the meeting with Petroffsky. "He's a quaint piece of work," he remarked.

"Quaint!" replied Biggles. "He's more than that. In my opinion he's more than half-way off his rocker. I only hope he doesn't come bellowing about here."

"He's all right when he's sober," explained Mayne. "It's when he gets a load of that infernal vodka inside him that he's apt to get a bit difficult. In that condition he's liable to do anything."

"So I imagine," answered Biggles dryly.

"But look here, old boy, what does all this amount to?" asked Bertie, when Algy had gone off to develop the photographs.

"If my arithmetic is any good it amounts to this," responded Biggles. "We've come to the right place. At any rate, there's something going on here. The big noise, apparently, is a Chinese bandit, but he, I'd say, is only a stooge. He may be wealthy and he may have big ambitions, but they would hardly run to the kidnapping of British scientists in England and Canada. No. There's somebody behind him, and that somebody is a European. Witness the black fighter. That machine wasn't being flown by a Mongolian tribesman. Put it like this. This fellow Ling Soo, ruler of this particular territory though he may be, is only a puppet. He's useful in that he can keep the country clear of unwanted visitors. When the white men behind him are ready they'll show him where he steps off, no doubt. I don't think Petroffsky knows this man personally. In fact, he doesn't know much about what's going on—but then, up

to the present he hasn't been interested. As far as air reconnaissance is

concerned the Birada is finished. That means we can do no more flying. The next move will have to be made on foot. We'll use prints of the photos in lieu of maps and do a spot of scouting. I hate walking, but there's no other way."

"Are we all going on this beastly jaunt?" inquired Bertie.

"No. Someone will have to stay in camp to look after the place and operate the canoe. It had better be Algy, since he's O.C. transport. The rest can go—part of the way, anyhow.

"

"What exactly are you going to do, if you see what I mean?" asked Bertie.

Biggles drew at his cigarette. "If you mean have I a plan, the answer is no. All we can do is march to the place where the Birada crashed, or just beyond it, and there establish an advanced base from which we can make sorties to see anything there is to see."

"What are you going to do about Petroffsky?" queried Mayne.

"We better ignore him for the moment," decided Biggles. "He shouts too much and he drinks too much. If he comes here, Algy can feed him on chocolates to keep him quiet."

"And when do we start hiking?" Ginger wanted to know.

"We might as well start in the morning, the earlier the better. There's no point in squatting here longer than is necessary. We shall have to take some food with us. We may be away for days. I'll think about the equipment we're likely to need. That's enough for now. I'm tired, and I can't stand these mosquitoes any longer, so I'm turning in."

Biggles put his heel on the stub of his cigarette and made for the tent.

## INTO THE UNKNOWN

BIGGLES had the expedition afoot at dawn the following morning after a night made miserable by mosquitoes which defeated all the precautions taken against them. It was really a relief for everyone to get up. Although he said nothing at the time, to Biggles these insects were more than a petty



*The march was not a simple matter*

annoyance. He felt sure that they were the deadly anopheles, and if that were so, then it would not be long before one or the other, or even the whole party, was laid low with malaria. He had taken the precaution of bringing quinine, and his first action was to dole out a ration all round. Apart from this, the march that now lay ahead was a long one, and he was anxious to be on his way. He knew the value of an early start; that time lost in the morning can never be recovered.



The preparation of food and equipment took a little while, for it was impossible to hazard even a guess as to how long the party would be away. Even if things went well, he reckoned that it could not be less than three or four days. That he had given the matter a good deal of thought was evident from the way he mustered the articles which he thought would be needed. His own and Ginger's kit had to be carefully and securely arranged on belts to go under their shirts, for it included items not normally to be found on the person of a simple Korean hunter; such things as wire-cutters, hacksaws, files and torches, to say nothing of iron rations and automatic weapons. Wrist-watches were put out of sight.

However, it was a fine morning, and by five o'clock, with long skeins of duck, geese and swans, fighting across a sky all soft pink and gold in an impressive sunrise, the party moved off. Algy transported the expedition to the mainland in the canoe, after which, as arranged, he returned to base.

"If Petroffsky turns up give him some chocolate and keep him quiet," was Biggles' last injunction to Algy.

Algy paddled back to the island, while the rest, in single file, with Biggles leading, set off, following the trail made on the previous evening.

For the first four hours the march was maintained at a steady pace, with five-minute halts every hour for rest, and for loads to be adjusted. The only delay occurred when Biggles thought it advisable to skirt the village of Kossuri to avoid running into Petroffsky, who, with the best of

intentions, might decide to accompany the party or otherwise embarrass it.

This is not to say that the march was a simple matter. Cross-country marches, even in civilised countries, seldom are, but here there were no bridges over the many streams which had to be forded sometimes waist-deep with packs held high to keep them dry.

Bogs had to be crossed with care, and always there were areas of tall reeds to impede progress. On the dry ground, when it occurred, precautions had to be taken against pitfalls. Biggles employed the same method to detect them as on the previous day. One was passed, on a game trail, in which lay the mouldering remains of what had once been a man. It brought home to everyone the reality of this

menace.

However, all went well, and by eleven o'clock the first objective was reached. This was the blackened area where the Birada had crashed and burnt itself out. This was approached with due care for fear of guards or scouts being placed to watch it. None was seen, although Ginger made a survey of the country around from the top of a convenient tree. After an early lunch the march was resumed, now with all the vigilance of troops moving in hostile territory. Biggles followed the trail made by the Mongolian horsemen, unmistakable in the long dry grass. Not a human being was seen, so Captain Mayne's services as an interpreter were not required, but in many ways his local knowledge was useful, and this alone was sufficient to justify his presence in the expedition. From time to time Biggles consulted the prints taken from the photographs obtained on the previous day. These, too, were a great help, for from them the nature of the country ahead could be determined with more accuracy, and with more detail than would have been possible from maps even if they had been available.

And so, without accident or a single alarm, a final halt was called on the fringe of a small forest of mixed trees, in which the dark green of walnuts was conspicuous. Here Biggles decided to establish the advanced base, for according to his calculations they were now within five miles of the enemy camp, and rather less than that from the straight trench which had been observed from the air. Nearer, he stated, it would not be safe for the entire party to go, for at any moment now they might come in contact with enemy defences, human or mechanical. In any case it would be better to have someone in reserve in case of accidents as well as a food dump on which to fall back should the need arise. So moving a little way into the trees the expedition, mud-plastered, scratched and insect bitten, sweating in the sultry heat, sat down to rest and discuss over a cup of tea the next move in the plan of campaign.

So far, averred Biggles, all had gone well, but it was only reasonable to suppose that doubts, difficulties and dangers would now crop up. First of all, he explained, he wanted a close view of the object which from the air he had taken to be a trench. He admitted that it would probably turn out to be something quite different, as he could not imagine what purpose a trench, in that particular place, could serve. It was conspicuous on the photograph, but it was still not possible to make out exactly what it was.

For rather more than an hour the party lay in the shade of the trees,

resting and talking things over, by which time the sun was beginning to fall towards the west. Then Biggles got up and made ready to move on, for from here he and Ginger were to go alone. Bertie and Mayne were to keep watch, make a bough-shelter in case the weather changed, and camouflage the position with such materials as were available.

"Any idea how long you'll be, old boy?" questioned Bertie.

"Not the foggiest," answered Biggles. "It all depends on what we find. We might be back in an hour or we might be a couple of days. We'll be back as soon as we can, you may be sure of that. You lie doggo. You know the rule in this sort of show. By day keep your eyes open, and at night your ears."

"Are you hoping to bring the jolly old scientists back with you?"

"I'm afraid that's a bit too much to hope for," replied Biggles. "It could happen, but if we can ascertain definitely that they're here, and discover where they're housed, we shall have done enough to go on with. Come on, Ginger."

We'll take it quietly. This walking makes an old man of me. My legs were made for rudder-bars, not padding the hoof like an animal."

Leaving Bertie and Mayne in the leafy hide-out Biggles set off at a steady pace with Ginger following close behind. There was this about it, as Ginger remarked. Dirty, and mired to the eyes, they did at least look like what they were supposed to be—two miserable Koreans who had lost their way.

As far as the actual state of the ground was concerned the going was now fairly good, although there were the usual muddy streams and boggy areas to be crossed with care.

Otherwise, the country ahead was slightly undulating, most of it deep in dry, rank grasses, a yard or mere high, with taller bulrushes filling the lower ground, and thick jungle of palm and bamboos, sometimes overgrown with wild vines, on the drier areas.

There were odd trees everywhere, and occasional stands of timber.

From the top of each rise, approached with due care. Biggles paused to study the ground ahead before advancing. With so much cover, in the ordinary way there would have been little risk of being seen; but to Biggles' annoyance and Ginger's alarm the country was literally

alive with game. Pheasants, snipe and wildfowl rose constantly, and this, as Ginger realised, could hardly fail to attract the attention of anyone in the vicinity. There was no way of avoiding this although, as Biggles pointed out, the thing cut two ways in that no one else could move about without a similar disturbance. This, in fact, did happen on one occasion; but it turned out to be a false alarm when the disturber of the marshes was observed to be a lone red wolf, which disappeared instantly when, passing downwind, it caught the taint of human bodies. A little while later a big herd of roe deer, apparently on a migration, passed by a short distance ahead. Game tracks were everywhere, which Biggles remarked was a good thing, because it meant that the track which they themselves were making in the grass would not be noticed.

In this way a distance which Ginger reckoned to be about four miles was covered, and there was still no sign of human activity or handiwork. To all intents and purposes they had this lonely world to themselves. The terrain ahead looked much the same, except that it seemed to be getting more thickly\_ wooded. On the right, the long arm of the lake lay like a sheet of turquoise glass, its shallow edges lined with countless birds of the wader class, feeding, squabbling, or in the case of the cranes, standing on one leg regarding the scene with expressions of utter boredom. To the left the country was mostly flat marsh and bog, although in the far distance a range of mountain peaks provided a serrated skyline.

During one of the now frequent halts Ginger remarked that if they went on any farther they would certainly not get back before nightfall. To this Biggles replied that it mattered little as a moon, nearly full, would provide as much light as they would need. He also pointed out that when it became dark any area of human habitation would almost certainly be marked by lights. Thus, darkness might serve them better than daylight, although he admitted that a light at night was a dangerous mark on which to march, since it was impossible to judge its distance, a bright light miles away having the same effect as a dim one near at hand. "Of course," Biggles went on, "the enemy may have imposed a black-out, although in such a remote spot as this it would hardly seem necessary. In any case, as the war proved, a one hundred per cent black-out is almost impossible to achieve. I once carried out some tests from five thousand feet and had no difficulty in spotting a fellow lighting a cigarette a couple of miles away, if there were no other lights about. According to my reckoning," he concluded, changing the subject, "that trench, or whatever it is, can't be far ahead. Let's carry on."

Grey dusk was now taking possession of the land, with seemingly endless wedges of wildfowl winging overhead to an unknown destination. Their raucous cries filled the air with clamour, and it must have been for this reason that other sounds, which otherwise must have been audible, were not noticed for some time.

Biggles and Ginger were picking their way through a thick belt of bulrushes that fringed a brook when Biggles,

who was slightly in front, turned a puzzled face. "Listen," he ordered. "Can you hear a queer sort of noise a little way ahead? It isn't birds—or is it?"

Ginger listened, although as a matter of fact he had already noticed the sounds to which Biggles had alluded. They were intermittent, not continuous, and when they occurred they were more like the barking troop of apes than the gabble made by a colony of birds.

However, not having the least idea of what it could be he could only grimace and shrug his shoulders.

Biggles went on slowly for about fifty yards and then came to a dead stop, sinking lower in the rushes and at the same time making an urgent signal to Ginger to do the same.

Ginger crouched, but went on slowly until he was at Biggles' side, when, peering through the screen of slender leaves, he saw the answer to not one, but two problems. First, about forty yards away in the open was what Biggles had taken to be a trench. It was not a trench, but the mistake was understandable. It was in fact the black face of what he took to be a peat hag, such as he had seen in Scotland. It formed a straight cliff some ten feet high and extended for seventy or eighty yards. On it a gang of men, some forty or fifty strong, were working—or more correctly had been working, for they were now backing away carrying their tools with them. The majority were obviously Koreans, but there were others, native types. He assumed they were Orochons, or similar local tribesmen, who had been captured and put to work. One thing was certain. This was the slave gang, for standing at intervals armed with rifles, were guards, men of the same Mongolian cast of features as those who had beaten up the two Korean merchants. They may have been the same men, for some horses were tethered close at hand. The big man in charge was certainly he who had wielded the whip on that occasion. He still carried the whip.

Standing by his horse he was barking orders, as were also his assistants. The effect of this was to create a babble which at once explained the mystery of the sounds that had brought Biggles to a halt.

The slaves, apparently, had just finished their labours, although this is not to say that they were allowed to rest.

Most of them were heaving on their shoulders great wickerwork baskets filled with black bricks they had cut from what later turned out to be an outcrop of lignite. Others were loading themselves up with the tools that had been used for the purpose. At the same time there was a steady movement towards a muddy path only a few yards away from where Biggles and Ginger crouched watching, and it soon became clear that this was the line on which the slaves were being mustered for their march back to wherever they were confined for the night. Filthy, in rags, emaciated, with eyes that seemed dead, they moved in silence, backs bent under their loads like weary beasts of burden—which in fact they were.

Ginger was staring with mounting indignation at this tragic spectacle when Biggles jogged his arm and whispered tersely: "Come on, this is our chance. Remember you're dumb. Behave as the others. Watch for landmarks." With that he stepped forward and in a moment had mingled with the nearest slaves. Ginger followed automatically, but not until, following Biggles' example, he was loading himself up with spades, did he realise fully the audacious step that Biggles had taken. For a second or two his knees went weak from shock; but the sight of Biggles moving wearily but unconcernedly with the rest, brought him to his senses, and he then played his part as well as his thumping heart would permit. Like the rest, keeping near Biggles he found a place in the line as the slave-master strode up brandishing his whip; but really his brain was still in a whirl from the suddenness of the transition. In one stride he had stepped from the peace of the quiet country into a situation so bristling with peril that he wondered if Biggles had any nerves at all. It was typical of him to make such a momentous decision on the spur of the moment. He had known many similar instances, but for sheer bare-faced, cold-blooded effrontery, mused Ginger desperately, this was hard to beat. He grasped Biggles'

intention easily enough. Instead of crawling about in the marshes looking for the objective they would now march straight to it. This, at any rate, was clearly the scheme, and it was reasonably possible. What worried Ginger was, having got in, how they were to get out. He had often heard Biggles refer to the accepted military maxim of always

having a line of retreat, but on this occasion he seemed to have abandoned it. They could not without taking a ghastly risk speak to each other. The wretched slaves had all been silenced by a horrible mutilation. To be caught speaking would therefore invite the same fate, if nothing worse.

By the time these sinister thoughts had flashed through Ginger's mind the ranks had been closed, and he imagined that the column was about to move off. Not so. To his unspeakable alarm a swart Mongolian came down the line obviously making a count to confirm there were no absentees. This was something which, Ginger was sure, Biggles had not taken into his reckoning; but nothing could be done about it. Apparently the guard discovered that something was wrong for he made a second check. Looking puzzled he went over and said something to the slave-master who was watching the proceedings with an expression of calculating malice. An argument of some sort ensued.

There was another count. However, in the end it must have been decided that a mistake had been made when the party set out; but the taskmaster was on the right side, having two slaves too many, which was an altogether different thing from being two short.

Anyhow, he allowed the matter to pass. The order to march was given and the column moved off.

The simultaneous obedience to the order revealed to Ginger a new risk. The slaves could not speak, but they could hear. They could understand orders, which he, having no knowledge of the language, could not. What would happen, he wondered with mounting apprehension, when he was given an order and failed to obey it. Perhaps it was better not to think about it.

The human crocodile wound its way across the dreary marshes, colourless in the grey twilight.

Ginger had in his time undertaken many curious and often unpleasant marches, but this, he pondered morosely, was the worst. The only sounds were the shuffling of feet and the creaking of harness as the guards rode up and down the line. The thing had all the characteristics of a nightmare, and Ginger found it hard to believe that it was really happening. He tried to pick out salient features of the landscape which might later serve as marks, but they seemed few and far between. When the end did finally come he had sunk into such a slough of despondency that he was unprepared for it. It was Biggles arm, knocking against his own, that brought him back to earth.

They were now in a thickly wooded area, with the track keeping to forest from which the undergrowth had been cleared. Ahead and on either side lights could be seen, all downcast by overhead shades. From their steadiness, Ginger noted with surprise, it was evident that they were electric. Dimly in the shadows he could just discern several large hutments, but nothing could be seen clearly.

The march ended abruptly. The baskets of fuel were emptied on a big dump of the same material. From a nearby hut came the throb of an engine. Ginger supposed that the fuel was used to drive it. Tools were stacked under a log shelter. The slaves then passed through a gate in a closely strangled barbed wire fence about ten feet high, into a compound from which came a stench so appalling that for a moment Ginger thought he must be sick. Outside the wire, grass still grew thickly, but inside, from constant trampling, the ground resembled a farmyard. After the prisoners had passed through, the gate was shut, sentries remaining on guard. These, it was later discovered, also patrolled the wire on the outside.

Ginger took care to keep close to Biggles, for it was evident that if they lost touch they might find it difficult to get together again. Slowly, for night had now fallen, they inspected their new quarters. There was not much to see. Near the wire on one side was a long open shed, in the manner of a field byre, and this was used evidently for the accommodation of the human animals, for most of the slaves made their way towards it.

Besides it, hard against the fence so that it could be filled from the outside, was a long trough, such as is provided for pigs in a sty. Making their way towards this now appeared two Koreans, each

carrying two buckets which, judging from the noise when their contents were emptied into the trough, was some sort of slop. Most of the slaves made a rush for it, pushing and fighting like so many animals in their haste to get their share, or perhaps more than their fair share. The weakest got none. Some fell, and lay on the ground making uncouth noises.

Ginger watched this dreadful spectacle with his gorge rising, yet at the same time with compassion. It is hardly necessary to say that neither he nor Biggles joined in the disgusting scramble. Presently Biggles turned and made his way through the mire to the shelter; but the smell of the place was nauseating, and he went on to the fence where he sank down to rest. Ginger dropped beside him. There was no one near, but for a little while neither spoke. The truth was, Ginger was so



utterly weary that he didn't care much what happened next. Overhead the stars gleamed in a cloudless sky. Above the coal-black wall of forest trees came the glow of the rising moon. From the swiftly emptied trough the slaves were drifting towards the shelter, so that soon the compound was deserted. Silence fell. Ginger pulled his thin shirt up above his ears. He was too tired even to think. As from a long way off he heard Biggles whisper: "Well, we're in, anyway."

"He did not answer. He could, he thought, safely leave the thinking to Biggles. He closed his eyes.

## THE PLOT UNFOLDS

GINGER had no idea of how long he had been asleep when he was awakened by Biggles squeezing his arm; but he felt that it had not been for very long. Still, he was refreshed, and alert on the instant when he remembered where he was. All was quiet. From the shelter not far away came the uneasy noises of sleeping men.

Biggles rolled over until his lips were almost touching Ginger's ear. "It's time we were moving," he breathed. "Where to?" asked Ginger, also speaking under his

breath.

"I've no intention of spending the night in this filthy pen," replied Biggles. "We'll have a look round and see what there is to see. The camp seems to be settling down."

"What's the time?"

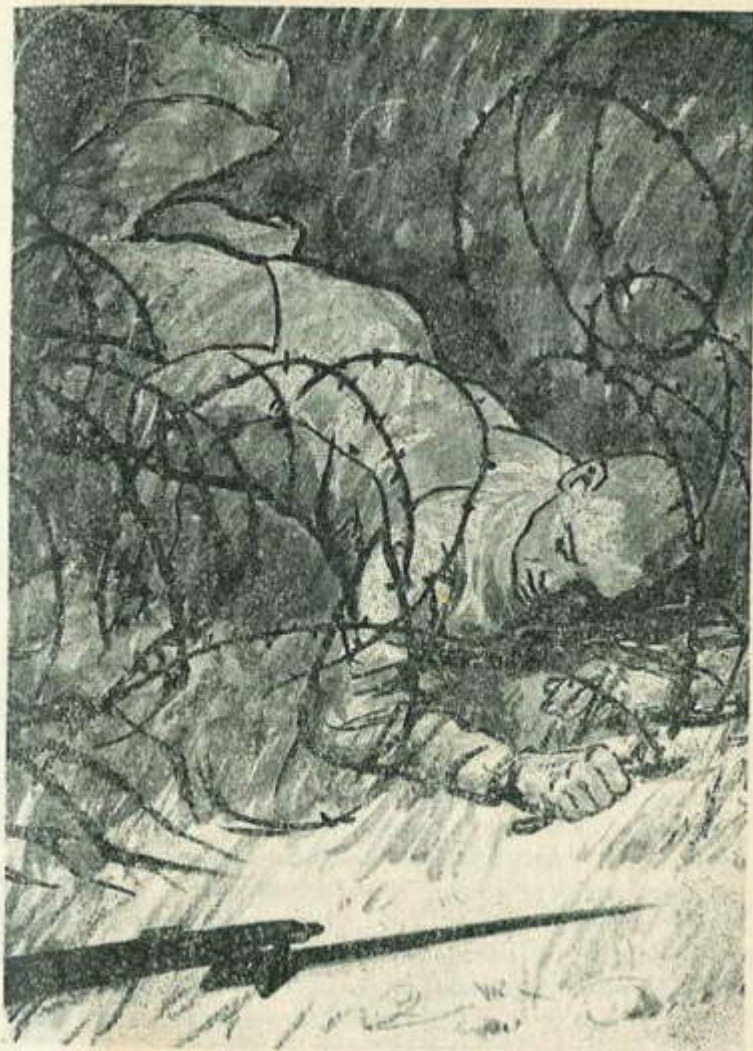
"Ten o'clock."

"How are you going to get out?"

"Cut the bottom strand of wire."

"What about the sentry?"

"He's on the prowl, but he doesn't seem to have a regular beat. I wish he had. We'll wait for him to go past." "Are you coming back here?"



*Heard the sentry's boots brushing in the grass, then came a  
"snick" as his cutters bit through the wire*

"Not on your life. I'm not going to spend to-morrow digging lignite."

"Where are you going to make for when you're out?"

"Nowhere in particular. It's all the same. There's plenty of cover. The thing is to try to find out if Vale is here, and if he is, make contact with him. That's enough to go on with."

We must see how he's fixed before we decide on the next move. Quiet! Here comes the sentry."

Ginger dropped back, feigning sleep. He did not see the sentry go past but he heard him, heard his boots brushing in the grass, the sound quickly fading. He felt Biggles move and a moment later came a snick as his cutters bit through the wire.

Biggles pulled the strand aside and rolled under the fence. Ginger followed. Biggles replaced the wire in its original position as far as this was possible, although as a matter of detail the long grass which grew under the wire would have made the break difficult to see even in daylight. They sneaked away through the grass, making for the nearest trees.

Reaching them, Biggles stood up, and the reconnaissance proceeded in more comfortable positions.

Lights were showing in many places in the trees, most of them coming from the open doors or windows of hutments,

of which there appeared to be several scattered about, all inside the forest, which explained why they had not been seen from the air. It was evident that any one of these might provide accommodation for the men whom they hoped to find, but there was no indication of which it was most likely to be; so the scouting could only proceed in a haphazard manner, Biggles taking the view that sooner or later they should come to the right one.

At the door of a hut of some size, just as they were approaching it, two men appeared, and stood for a moment talking in a language which neither Biggles nor Ginger recognised. Presently they parted, one going in and the other walking away into the darkness.

Ginger found it all very confusing. There was, he felt, plenty to see, but in the darkness under the trees nothing could be made out distinctly. One thing only became apparent.

The camp was of a considerable size and covered a large area of ground. The huts themselves were of the temporary sort, being built of rough timber apparently cut on the spot, and roofed with thatch or corrugated iron. Many of the huts showed lighted windows, in which, occasionally, the silhouettes of the occupants were framed. More barbed wire was encountered. Biggles, unable to find a way round one fence, cut through it, and he and Ginger found themselves in a veritable farmyard with horses, cows and sheep. Later, behind more

wire, they could see the shape of a large house of Oriental design. A sentry lounged at the door. Once they had to lie flat while a party of drunken, brawling Mongolians went past. The incident helped to create in Ginger's mind an impression that they were in a big military camp. For the rest, it was still all very vague.

Biggles apparently thought so too, for after a

while he stopped and remarked: "This blundering about isn't getting us anywhere. At this rate we shall still be here when daylight comes. We've got to find out who occupies these huts and keep at it until we strike the one we're looking for. Vale must be here somewhere. I'm going back to the big house we passed just now. It must be the headquarters, or the house of the head man. It would be something if we could find out who he is."

"There was a sentry," reminded Ginger.

"I know. That's what makes me think it's a building of importance. We needn't go through the gate; we'll cut the wire and get to the house from the far side."

Biggles, who from the missions he had undertaken had become something of a specialist in underground as well as overhead warfare, led the way back to the building he had mentioned. Like the rest, it was well hidden in the trees. From three windows on the same side broad beams of light fell across the uncut grass beneath them. None of these windows was curtained although all were netted against the mosquitoes. One was open.

Regarding this feature from fairly near at hand Ginger formed the opinion that the windows served a single room, although it would be a room of some length; and this presently turned out to be the case. From within came a faint confused murmur of voices.

What, or who, Biggles expected to see inside, Ginger did not know. He did not ask. He himself was prepared for almost anything—except, perhaps, what they did actually find.

He was more concerned with the situation in which he found himself, for it is not to be supposed that moving about the camp was a simple matter. Others were abroad, too.

They could not always be 'seen, but they could be heard. And there were the inevitable mosquitoes to make life a misery.

Biggles crept quietly forward to the dark side of the house. Here there seemed to be little risk of being seen by the sentry, who was taking his duties in a most casual manner, smoking and exchanging remarks with passers-by, and between times yawning audible.

It was obvious that he did not expect to be troubled, and consequently thought his job unnecessary.

Biggles cut the surrounding wire, went through, followed by Ginger, and then moving with extreme caution made his way to the rear of the house. There was nothing to be learned there, so keeping close to the wooden wall they went on to the side that held the lighted windows. The sills, it was discovered, were about four feet from the ground.

Reaching the first Biggles sank down and remained motionless. Ginger did the same, glad of a pause, for his

nerves were now at full stretch and it gave him a chance to steady them.

While he sat there an extraordinary feeling came over him that this situation had occurred before, although for a little while he could not understand why. Inside, a man was speaking, speaking with what seemed to be some asperity; and it suddenly struck him that, incredible though it seemed, he knew the voice. He knew it, but he could not place it, for somehow it did not fit into his immediate surroundings. Another reason for this, as he realised quickly, was because the speaker, who spoke in German, was interrupted frequently by a curious gibberish which he could not understand. Sometimes it actually overran what the speaker was saying. The effect was peculiar.

He felt, rather than saw, Biggles rise up slowly for a peep into the room, and even before Biggles had dropped back with a quick intake of breath he remembered the owner of that hard, crisp voice. He was Biggles' opposite number in the Nazi service during the war, now in voluntary exileHauptmann Erich von Stalhein, the efficient, ruthless, aristocratic German agent, with whom Biggles, by reason of the nature of the missions he undertook, had for long been in collision.

Ginger's first reaction was incredulity, complete and utter. The very idea seemed preposterous. What would the man be doing in that remote part of the globe? But very soon he perceived that, far from his presence there being remarkable, it might even have been expected. The German was now a soldier of fortune and this was just the sort of undertaking towards which, by virtue of his qualifications, he would gravitate. What of his own and Biggles' arrival on the scene? Von Stalhein, he mused, would no doubt think that remarkable, whereas in fact it was not.

In point of fact, in this respect Ginger was wrong, as he was very soon to learn. Von Stalhein had on this occasion at least foreseen a possibility which Biggles had not—the entry of a personal rival into this distant arena.

There were other people in the room, for sometimes other voices spoke; and judging from the variety of languages used they were not all of the same nationality.

Ginger thought he recognised Russian, but there was another that conveyed nothing to him at all. German seemed to be the general language, and from the way sentences were echoed in a curious monotone he was soon able to grasp the situation. What was being said was being translated by interpreters for the benefit of those who did not speak that particular language. It was confusing, but he was soon able to follow the conversation because it occurred either in German or was translated into it.

Biggles drew close to Ginger, and cupping his hands round his mouth, whispered: "

Committee meeting. Von Stalhein's there, and an Oriental who I think must be Ling Soo.

Ten of 'em altogether . . . some Russians I think. Listen."

At this period von Stalhein was speaking. Indeed, he seemed to be holding the floor in a voice charged with bitter denunciation. It was plain that he was angry about something.

But it was the subject of this conversation that shook Ginger more than a little. "Let me remind you," he was saying, "I did not solicit this work. I was invited here. You came to me to take charge of intelligence and security, of which, as apparently you knew, I am not without experience. What co-operation do I get? None. My suggestions are ignored, my orders disobeyed. Information of vital importance is deliberately withheld from me.

Ach, yes, I am well aware of that. What is the use of employing a specialist if you do not put him in possession of all the relevant facts? How do you expect me to perform my duties efficiently if I am not told the truth?"

There were protests at this, but von Stalhein silenced them and went on to support his allegations. "When, at your request, I called on your agent in Europe I was assured that your organisation had the official backing of your governments. Aus, you misled me from the outset, for I know now that this is not the case. Certain members of certain governments are involved, I know, but not for the purpose you put forward. Their interests, I suspect, is entirely personal. By the control of atomic weapons they hope to intimidate—or shall we call a spade a

spade and say blackmail—the rest of the world, to their financial and political advantage. That goes for you, too, of course. But do not misunderstand me. I still find the proposition attractive. I am merely endeavouring to point out that you would do better to trust me and accept my advice."

There was another interruption, and von Stalhein went on. "You want an example. Very well. Consider Luntz. What I suggested was an obvious precaution, yet you opposed it."

"But you had your way," argued a voice.

"After a struggle. And look at these drunken Mongolians. No attempt is made to control them. They are still being given unlimited vodka."

Again a voice was raised in protest, in an unknown language. On being translated, evidently for the speaker's benefit, it came to this; that the Mongolian guards would desert in a body if their drink was cut off.

Von Stalhein went on. "Ach, so! Very well. I warn you that if this state of affairs continues the whole thing will end in disaster. Already it may be too late to remedy the mischief already done, for that there has been a breach of security I am convinced by what happened this morning. Yet you do nothing. Lieutenant Vasilloff here reported that the men in the plane were Koreans. I don't believe it. It is assumed that they came this way by accident. I don't believe that, either. The aircraft was here for a purpose, and I know, and you should know, what that purpose was. I say it was making a reconnaissance of this area. I would even go so far as to make a guess at the name of the man who flew it."

At this point there were several interruptions, mostly of a scornful nature; but von Stalhein went on, raising his voice, now brittle with suppressed anger.

"You say it's impossible," he accused. "I say nothing is impossible to well-trained agents, and, as I know to my cost, with these Britain is well supplied. She has been at the game for a long time and knows every trick. Rumour, if nothing more, of what is going on here has leaked through to the British Government, which, through its Foreign Office, has a way of solving mysteries. If, as I think, word has reached them, their first move would be to dispatch a man to investigate I suspect that man is here, and I know the one they would send. His name is Bigglesworth. It is just the sort of work on which he has specialised. If he is not already here, he will come, and yet you are content to go on as if nothing has happened. Even now he may be in this very—"

There was a chorus of incredulous exclamations.

"Very well. You will see," snapped von Stalhein, whose normal imperturbability was obviously being strained.

"Lieutenant Vasilloff shot down the plane and the men were brought in," said a voice.

"The men who were brought in were not those in the plane," declared von Stalhein. "A dolt could see that at a glance. They were common traders. Their story rings true and the contents of their packs confirm it. They are Koreans and they speak Korean. They brought in supplies of vodka and cartridges for this mad Cossack who lives in the marshes. Had my advice been taken he would have been liquidated long ago. Any man living there would be a menace and this one talks too much. He can do no good and he may do harm. The truth is, these drunken



Mongolians are afraid of him. But let that pass. The two men who were in the plane got away. They must have got away or their bodies would have been there. They must be found."

Another voice broke in, and in it there was an element of doubt. "This reminds me of something," said the speaker. "According to Ming, at the end of the day's work there were two extra men in the gang. He mentioned this to me."

There was a brief silence. Then von Stalhein rasped: "Why was I not told of this at once?"

What has been done about it?"

From excuses muttered in a surly voice it was fairly evident that nothing had been done about it.

Von Stalhein became brusque. "This is a matter that must be settled right away," he rapped out. "Prince, will you please give orders for all workmen to be mustered instantly.

Examine their mouths and you will find the two

extra men. They will be the men who were in the aeroplane, and one of them. I would wager, will be Bigglesworth. Bring them to me. I shall know them. Let this be done at once or I will not accept responsibility for the consequences. If they are no longer in the compound the country must be scoured until they are found. Put double guards on all places that matter."

Said another voice: "What is all this fuss about one man, even if his name is Bigglesworth? Are we to think you are afraid of him?"

"No," answered von Stalhein slowly. "I am not afraid, but I have a respect for his ability.

He is one of those men who, while others are talking, acts, and had he not been under the protection of the devil himself he would have been dead long ago. He is as hard to catch as an old fox, and as hard to hold as an eel. If he is about I am all the more relieved to know that Luntz is where he is."

Ginger frowned. This was the second reference to Luntz.

/ He wondered who and where he was.

"We are wasting time," went on von Stalhein. "The first thing to do, Prince, is to order Ming to examine the mouths of the workmen. You should find two with tongues. It shouldn't take long. We'll wait here."

There was a murmur of assent, and a scraping of chairs indicated a general move.

The anxiety, not to say consternation, with which Ginger had listened to von Stalhein's arguments, calls for little imagination; but before he could dwell on them Biggles had touched him on the arm and was gliding like a shadow along the wall of the house to the rear, from where he made his way to the nearest trees. Ginger, of course, went with him.

They were only just in time, for without warning unsuspected lights over the front of the house were switched on, throwing the area of the door into clear relief. A group of men emerged, talking in low tones. One called loudly. The sentry answered and hurried to the door.

Ginger, from where he lay, could now see the men for the first time. Von Stalhein was there, a tall, soldierly figure, the usual cigarette in its long holder. There were two Chinese in national dress, one resplendent in the robes of a mandarin. The rest appeared to be nondescript European types in ordinary civilian clothes. The one nearest to Ginger was a thick-set, elderly man, with a broad, slab-like, impassive face. It was impossible to even make a guess at his nationality.

For a few minutes there was a good deal of activity. The big taskmaster, whose name apparently was Ming, arrived, complete with his whip and his gang, and after a short conversation with "Prince" Ling Soo, retired, presumably to examine the slaves in the compound. Ginger broke into a cold perspiration at the narrowness of their escape, if only for the time being. That the compound might be searched at this hour of the night was something even Biggles could hardly have foreseen. Nor could he have realised what effect the appearance of a strange aircraft would have on the enemy—but then, of course, he had been unaware that von Stalhein was in the picture, a circumstance that altered the entire situation. It was he who had sounded the alarm; and having come off second best to Biggles on so many occasions he was more than a little apprehensive, whatever he might say to the contrary. On his own statements he might almost be said to have developed a Biggles complex. Yet his reasoning had been sound enough, thought Ginger. His shrewd brain had, in fact, grasped the situation with uncanny accuracy; and this, for the intruders, was

likely to have serious consequences. The enemy camp was now on the alert, and this would inevitably make the work of rescue more difficult. He wondered what Biggles' reactions would be.

He was soon to know. Again Biggles touched him on the arm and withdrew farther into the trees. "Listen," he said. "We've got to get cracking. This is our chance, while they're all busy in the compound. It will take them some time to get those exhausted slaves on their feet, and round them up for inspection. When the number is found to tally most of von Stalhein's associates will be satisfied, no doubt. But not von Stalhein. If he's got it into his head that we're in the country, and obviously he has, he'll pull every trick he knows to catch up with us."

"Imagine him being here," breathed Ginger.

"Yet why not?" returned Biggles. "This is just the sort of racket you'd expect to find him in. He had a big reputation in Germany at one time, and the people who are running this show, needing such a man, would soon get in touch with him. After all, what can the wretched fellow do? He was a Nazi. If he returned to his own country he'd be tried by a denazification court and hanged, or at any rate sent to jail for life. So he's drifting about the world like a ship without a rudder. He's got to live somehow, and the fact that he's working for this bunch doesn't necessarily mean that he's in sympathy with them.

Judging from what he said just now he hasn't much time for them. He certainly said a mouthful—too much, perhaps, for he must have touched some of them on the raw, and they won't forget it. I'd say that to admit that he knew what he threw at them was indiscreet—considering the type of people he's working for. To give the devil his due, he'

s efficient. That's his trouble. Notice the way he worked out that I was on the job. He was right on the nail. But with some people efficiency doesn't always pay. Here we have a bunch of ambitious war-mongers, and as ambition goes hand in hand with vanity, the more often von Stalhein is right, and proves his employers wrong, the more they'll resent it. Instead of supporting him they'll oppose him, and that's where they'll come unstuck. It'

s an old story. But this is no time for philosophy. Thanks to von Stalhein we've collected a vital piece of information, anyway, a piece that Raymond will be glad to have. Let's get weaving. We've got to locate our men to-night; we may not get another chance."

Standing up, Biggles made a survey of what little could be seen of the enemy camp. The compound was out of sight, but sounds coming from its direction indicated that the examination of the slaves was proceeding. The group outside the door of the house went back inside, presumably to await the result.

Ginger, too, tried to probe the darkness around him. It was all very confusing. There were several huts deep in the trees, their position being revealed in many cases by lighted windows, which were only shaded from above. But there appeared to be no way of determining which particular hutment was the one they sought. It would, he thought, be safe to assume that the scientists would be housed in a building of some sort but that was all. He expressed his doubts.

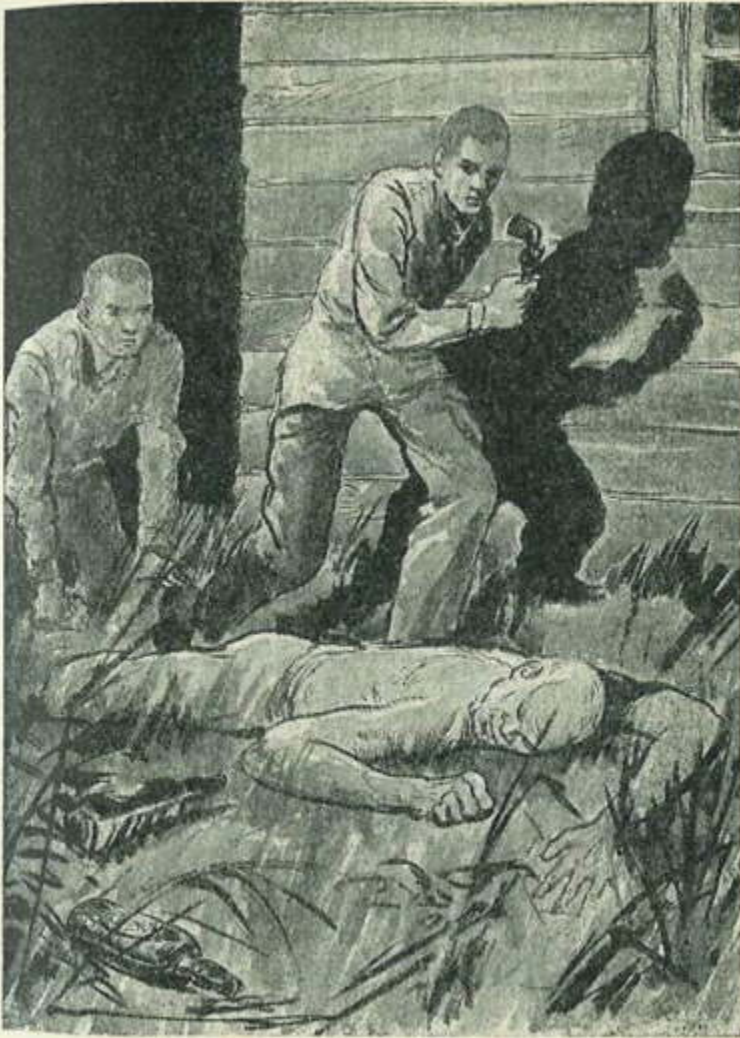
Biggles agreed that it was difficult. "We shall just have to go from one to the other till we strike the right one," he said. "It's pretty certain that our men will be behind barbed wire.

That should be a guide. We haven't much time. We've got to be out of this before daylight."

With this decision Ginger was in complete agreement.

if— If

THE search began. In the darkness, and in the absence of any knowledge of the layout of the camp, it was a tedious, nerve-racking business, for while most of the Mongol troops had been concentrated in the region of the slave-yard there was still a number drifting



*The Mongolian did not attempt to rise—which for him  
was just as well*

aimlessly, most of them the worse for drink. Fortunately they made a good deal of noise, quarrelling and singing, which announced their approach in ample time for cover to be taken. Nevertheless, there were several narrow escapes. One in particular turned Ginger's mouth dry with shock, as well as giving him a bruise on the shin. They were crossing a patch of the deep grass which occurred everywhere between the trees when he stumbled over an object which overturned with a jangle of glass. In trying to recover himself he trod on

something soft and warm that lay near it. It was a nasty moment, for he knew that it could only be a human body. Spinning round prepared to fight he saw that it was one of the Mongolians, apparently asleep. It turned out that the man was in a drunken stupor, and although he stirred uneasily, muttering, he did not attempt to rise—which for him was just as well, for Biggles had whipped out his pistol, holding it by the muzzle ready to strike should the man open his mouth. The precaution was unnecessary. The Mongol slipped back into his besotted slumber. Biggles replaced his weapon with a shrug of contempt. Ginger, wiping the sweat of shock from his forehead, saw that the object over which he had tripped was a case of the now familiar vodka bottles. Two lay empty beside the intoxicated body. Biggles beckoned and they went on, leaving the sleeper to his drink-sodden dreams.

For an hour or more—Ginger lost count of time—they wandered about the camp, groping their way through trees, crawling through dry grass, creeping from hut to hut without getting even so much as a clue to guide them to their objective. There were well-used paths, carefully camouflaged where they crossed open spaces. Indeed, there was a maze of them, as there is bound to be in a camp of any size; but as these were being used by men moving about—men who, moreover, often carried torches—Biggles thought it advisable to keep clear of them. Those not covered by camouflage netting were concealed from overhead observation by the upper branches of the trees through which they ran, so it was easy to see why they had escaped notice when the Birada had made its reconnaissance. It was obvious that the camp had been established in the forest for that very purpose. It was for the same reason that the black fighter had not been spotted.

Biggles and Ginger, in the course of their wanderings, came upon it near the outer fringe of the trees. It was mounted on a catapult of obsolete but quite effective pattern, facing down a short clearing which ended in open ground. There was no guard. Biggles ran a professional eye over it, and hesitated as if he contemplated doing something, but presently he passed on without a word.

Soon afterwards, Ginger, who was walking with his hands held out in front of his face to protect his eyes from the ends of broken branches which could not be seen in the gloom, encountered barbed wire. How far it extended on either side he could not see, but behind it was a log hut of some length. One window, near the end, was lighted; and it may have been due to the light in his eyes that for a time he could see nothing else. Presently, by staring hard, he could just make out the shape of a much larger in the background, a building not less than

forty yards long. Both buildings seemed to be in the same enclosure. The ground was deep in the usual dry grass. Midway between the two huts, and to one side, apparently set in the wire fence, was yet another building, but this was tiny compared with the two large ones. He thought he could just make out the shape of a man [standing by it as if it might have been a sentry outside a guardroom.](#)

A soft hiss brought Biggles, who was slightly behind, to the spot. For several seconds they stood still side by side staring at what could dimly be seen behind the wire, for only the lighted window was distinct. By sheer concentration, after a little while Ginger could just discern what seemed to be a veranda running along the length of the nearer hut. At about the middle of this from time to time a pinpoint of light glowed to a bright orange. This puzzled him, for he could not think what it could be. It was too stationary to be a firefly. Closing his eyes for a moment to rest them he looked again, and thought he could see several vague figures in a curious reclining position. Then a match flared suddenly and he understood. The point of light was the glowing end of a cigarette.

Someone was there, resting and smoking. A moment later shoes scraped on a board floor. A door was opened. Light flooded out, revealing clearly everything within its radius of influence. A man moved until his silhouette stood out black against the lighted entrance. Softly through the still air came a voice. "Good night all," it said quietly, in English. The speaker went in, closing the door behind him. Darkness returned. But still a cigarette glowed.

Biggles' hand had closed over Ginger's arm. "Okay," he breathed. "This is it."

But Ginger was now looking at something else, something about twenty yards away along the line of the fence, a solid-looking object which he was sure had not been there a minute earlier. While he watched it, it moved, and grew more definite in outline.

He recognised it for a man walking slowly towards them, apparently along the outside of the wire. In an instant he had jerked Biggles' sleeve and was crouching back into the shadows behind them. Biggles followed. Whether or not he had seen the man approaching Ginger did not know, but there was no time to utter a warning. The man loomed up, a rifle on his shoulder. He walked straight past, and presently merged into the dark background.

Biggles waited for a good two minutes. Then he breathed: "The fence

is patrolled, but I must try to contact Vale if he's here."

How he proposed doing this Ginger did not know, for the men on the veranda were a good twenty yards away, and to call would certainly attract the attention of the sentry.

True, the wire could be cut; but if the wire was closely patrolled, the severed strands would be noticed when daylight came; so if it should happen that immediate rescue was impossible they would have betrayed their presence in the camp for no purpose. In that case extra precautions against the escape of the prisoners would certainly be taken. And anyway, thought Ginger swiftly, there was no actual proof yet that the men behind the wire were those they sought. The English-speaking voice made it seem a fairly safe conclusion, but it was not absolutely definite. There might be other English-speaking people in the camp, and it was not the moment to take risks that a little patience would avoid. Thus thought Ginger as he waited to see what Biggles would do.

Biggles' method of attracting attention was simple and reasonably safe. If Vale was there, he would understand. If not, no harm would be done. In a soft whistle such as might have been made by a nightbird he sent out, in morse code, Vale's own initial call sign; the three Vees.

There was no response. The men on the veranda, who had started to talk in low tones, continued without pause, as if the signal, if it had been noticed, had conveyed nothing to them. There was just a chance, thought Ginger, with a twinge of disappointment, that Vale was not there. Or he might have been the man who had gone in. He might never have revealed his true identity to the others, or explained the significance of his initials, in which case the signal would pass without comment.

However, this was not the case. The men on the veranda were still talking, but suddenly a shadow loomed up so close to the wire that Ginger started back, thinking it was a sentry.

Then, like the breath of a breeze in the trees, came the answering signal,. — . . . — . . .

—

Biggles echoed it.

A voice said softly: "Where are you?" and all doubts were set at rest.



"Here," answered Biggles.

The figure moved forward. "Who are you?"

"Bigglesworth, of the Special Air Branch. Your messenger got through. The Yard sent me out to locate you and get you home."

"Thank God for that," came the voice fervently. "We're having an awful time here. We couldn't have lasted much longer."

"Then the others are with you?"

"All except General Gorton who was shot trying to escape."

"That leaves four of you altogether?"

"No, six."

"Six?"

"We were four, but an American was brought in about a month ago, and a Polish professor soon afterwards. But make haste. It's a minute to eleven, and at eleven sharp we're locked in for the night."

"In this hut?"

"Yes."

"Then answer my questions quickly," requested Biggles. "Do you have separate rooms?"

"No. We sleep in one long dormitory."

"You've no means of getting out of it?"

"No. The windows are barred. Then there's this fence." "You've no tools?"

"No. We're searched every night at roll-call and our shoes are taken away."

"What happens to them?"

"They're locked in a pantry at the end of the hut. The door's on the outside."

"Who keeps the key?"

"The guard in the guardroom at the gate. It's on a bunch. They hang on a nail. The big one is the key of the gate through this fence. The next is the key of this hut. One unlocks the workshop—that's the big building behind—and the smallest is the key of the boot pantry."

"How many guards are on duty at a time?"

"Three. They take turns patrolling the wire. There's always a surprise visit sometime during the night, when we are counted."

"Where are you in the daytime?"

"In the big workshop behind our quarters."

At this moment a whistle was blown and a guttural voice shouted: "All insides! "

"That's it," said Vale urgently. "I must go or they'll be looking for me."

"Okay," said Biggles. "I'll get in touch with you again presently. Stand by. I'll come to a window."

Vale walked back quickly to the veranda, where there was now a general stir. Vague figures moved in the gloom. A harsh voice spoke, and seemed to be counting. This was followed by the noises of the prisoners being secured for the night. A heavy door slammed. Keys jangled. The light went out.

Biggles backed away from the wire into the trees, pulling Ginger with him. "Well, that's something," he said softly. "We know where they are and how they're fixed. With the tools we've got, when the place settles down we shouldn't have much trouble getting them out. Their shoes are the big problem. It's an old dodge, that, but effective. No man accustomed to footgear can get far without any—certainly not in country like this. Which means that as well as getting the men out we've got to open this pantry where their shoes are kept."

"Then how about making a start?" suggested Ginger. "We'd better wait a little while to give the guards a chance to get into their routine," advised Biggles.

Sitting at the foot of a tree they waited. The heat was oppressive. Fireflies danced.

Mosquitoes hummed. A sentry, his rifle shouldered in reverse, strolled by, following the wire. It was evident from his attitude that he was

not expecting anything to happen. No doubt he had done the job many times before.

"How about giving him a crack on the dome next time he goes by?" suggested Ginger.

"It would bring one of his pals along to see what had happened to him."

"We could dish him out with a dose of the same medicine."

Biggles considered the suggestion but decided against it. "If we can get in without any fuss it'll be better that way. We'll let the sentry make one more tour and then get moving.

I wish I knew how often he comes round."

It was about a quarter of an hour before the sentry reappeared, now smoking a cigarette.

As soon as he had passed out of sight Biggles rose, and in a matter of seconds had cut the lower strands of the wire. Another moment and they were both inside, walking quickly towards the prisoners' sleeping quarters. Reaching the hut, keeping close against the wall Biggles went on to the nearest window, a small one with iron bars secured on the outside in a horizontal position. A quick examination revealed that the others were the same. They were at an awkward height, the sills being some four feet from the ground, which meant that the bars could only be tackled by reaching up. It was obvious, too, that at least four bars would have to be removed to make an aperture large enough for a man of average size to pass through.

"I'm afraid this is going to be a long job," muttered Biggles. "If the windows are made to open, the fellows inside would be able to get to the bars more easily. I want to let Vale know we're here, anyway." Putting a hand between the bars he tapped the V-signal very quietly on the glass.

Apparently Vale had been waiting, for almost at once the window was opened and the signal came back. Vale's face appeared dimly behind the bars.

"Everything normal?" asked Biggles.

"Yes."

"Have you told the others we're here?"

"Not yet. I thought it better to keep mum until I'd had a word with you, to find out just what you intend to do. No use getting everyone excited too soon."

"Quite right. Where are they now?"

"Gone to bed."

"Then you'd better wake them up and tell them." "I'll do that after the inspection, otherwise Grosnow may sense the excitement and smell a rat."

"What inspection? Who's Grosnow?"

"He's one of the head men here. He's in charge of us. He does a sort of orderly officer stunt every night about this time to make sure we're still here."

"I see. Glad you warned me. I've cut the fence. All we have to do now is move some of these bars. They're an awkward height for me outside. Could you manage it better from there if I gave you the tools?"

"I think so—but I'll wait till Grosnow has been round before I start."

"Good enough."

"What about our shoes?"

"We'll attend to that," promised Biggles. "Here, take this file. I'm afraid a hacksaw will make too much noise." "Filing is going to take some time."

"Can't be helped. Do the best you can." Biggles turned to Ginger. "Slip along to this pantry place to see if it looks like being difficult to crack open."

"Okay." Ginger crept along the wall until he reached the end. A quick survey revealing no sign of danger he made an inspection of the pantry, which, he found, was merely an extension of the prisoners' quarters. To his dismay he saw that the two windows, one on each side of the door, were tiny, not more than eighteen inches square—too small, he thought, for entrance to be obtained that way. That only left the door. It was made of rough, heavy timber, and he perceived that

even with tools it would be impossible to force it open without a good deal of noise.

A slight sound took him on to the end of the gable, from where he could see the guard hut. The gate of the enclosure had been opened, and three men were entering. This, he guessed, was the inspection which Vale had mentioned. He hurried back to Biggles. "Cave," he whispered. "Grosnow is coming across.

Warn Vale to watch out."

But apparently Vale had heard. Silence fell. Biggles stood close against the wall, nerves taut, listening. He heard the door of the hut open. The light was switched on. Heavy footsteps thudded slowly, a step at a time, on a board floor. For a minute not a word was spoken. Ginger could imagine the sort of inspection that was going on. Then a voice burst out, so loud that his nerves twitched. "Attention!" it said, in a strange foreign accent. "I warn again, if any man tries to go he will have a bullet."

There was no answer.

Again the footsteps, now receding. The door was shut. Silence returned.

Biggles whispered: "What about the boot pantry?" "I don't know what we can do about it,

" answered Ginger. He explained the difficulties.

"It rather looks as if we shall have to get the keys," murmured Biggles. "I'll think about it. Keep your eyes skinned."

Vale reappeared at the window. "All clear," he said. "I'm going to tell the others now.

Then I'll make a start on the bars."

"Good enough."

At that moment there came a sound which turned out to be the forerunner of others which were to put a very different aspect on the entire situation, although this was not realised at the time. The sound was a gunshot, some distance away. But it was unmistakable.

"What the deuce was that, I wonder?" muttered Biggles.

The question was soon to be answered for him. Inside a minute there came another shot.

But this was nothing to what came next. A voice was raised, shouting—nay, bellowing; and at the words, and the language used, Ginger went rigid.

"Ho there!" came the voice through the still night air.

"Ho there! Mayne! Where are you Mayne?" Bang went the gun again.

For a moment neither Biggles nor Ginger spoke. Then Ginger said, in a queer, thin voice:

"Petroff sky!"

"Aye, and drunk by the sound of it," replied Biggles bitterly. "The fool," he went on, in his anger speaking through his teeth. "The silly, drunken imbecile. Pity that tiger didn't get him."

"But how on earth did he get here?"

"Heavens only knows. Blundered on our trail and followed us. I suppose. Got drunk on his last consignment of vodka and decided to call on Mayne. Probably went to the island and learning Mayne wasn't there decided to go and look for him. This means we shall have to adjust our plan. Are you still there, Vale?"

"Yes."

"All right. Go ahead, but something is happening which may upset things. We're going to find out what's going on. We'll be back. If by any chance we don't turn up in the next couple of hours start off on your own. Head for the big lake and keep along the eastern edge. There's an aircraft waiting at one of the islands. There's a pilot with it. See you later, I hope. Come on, Ginger."

Biggles moved quickly towards the gap in the fence.

## THE VELVET GLOVE

HAVING left the prison hut enclosure through the gap in the wire Biggles made for the direction of Petroff sky's approach. There could be no question of intercepting him. This had already been done by men from the camp. Others were hurrying towards the spot, from - where now arose a general hubbub. Above it all rose Petroffsky's

bellow, as he continued to shout for Mayne. More lights were switched on, so that large areas of the camp appeared to be floodlit, making everything plain to see. What the lights revealed, was not, in the circumstances, surprising. As Biggles observed, the Russian had certainly stirred things up.

Into the camp came Petroffsky, roaring as he fought a dozen or more Mongols who were hanging on to him like a pack of dogs baiting a bull. He had already been disarmed, but he fought with flailing arms. Time and time again he flung his assailants off, shouting what sounded like curses in his native tongue. But they always came back, striving to get a grip on the whirling arms. There was reason to suppose that orders had been given that he was not to be seriously hurt, otherwise, of course, he would not have lasted for so long. Supporting this supposition was the presence of von Stalhein. He was standing only a short distance away, watching with his usual frigid calm. Close to him, in a group, were the men with whom he had recently been in conference, when the Russian had been discussed.

At last, panting and bedraggled, Petroffsky was brought to a standstill quite close to the trees in which Biggles and Ginger crouched, watching. But this is not to say that he was in the slightest degree intimidated. He confronted his persecutors defiantly, shouting in a variety of languages what he would do if he was not taken to see "his old friend Mayne"

instantly. Once he paused to take a drink from a bottle which he suddenly produced from a pocket, afterwards hurling the bottle at the head of the nearest Mongol.

Eventually von Stalhein acted. First he said something to the men near him, then went on towards Petroffsky, and silencing the babble of voices with a gesture, addressed the Russian in the language he had used when shouting for Mayne.

"Of course—of course," said von Stalhein gently, in such a voice as he might have used to pacify a wayward child. "Of course you shall see your old friend Mayne. Unfortunately he isn't here at the moment, but we'll soon find him.

I'm sorry you've been treated so disgracefully, but my men were under orders, and I was not to know that you were coming." Von Stalhein patted the Russian on the arm and waved away the Mongols, who looked at each other in amazement, as well they might.

"This scum attacked me," declared Petroff sky, in a haughty voice.  
"Scum, sir, that's what they are. Do you know who I am?"

"Of course," replied von Stalhein, who apparently knew the answer to the question. "

Everyone knows Colonel Alexis Petroffsky. I regret that these fools of sentries failed to recognise an officer and a gentleman."

Petroffsky bowed low, and nearly fell over. "I accept your apology," he said gravely. "I observe, sir, that you, too, are a gentleman. Say no more. Will you take a little drink with me?"

"With pleasure," replied von Stalhein. "But first, since you are my guest, you must drink with me. I have some excellent vodka. But let us not talk here. Come to my quarters, where we can talk in peace."

Petroffsky bowed again. "Sir, I am honoured. But what of my old friend Mayne?"

"I haven't seen him lately," parried von Stalhein. "Is he here?"

"He came this way."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Certainly I'm sure."

"How do you know?"

"His friends . . ." Petroff sky hesitated, as if even in his befuddled state he realised that he was saying too much.

"No matter, my dear Colonel," went on von Stalhein smoothly. "If he is here he shall join us as soon as he can be found. Come along. Let's have a drink." He took the Russian by the arm, and still chattering amicably walked slowly towards a small hutment that stood alone not far from the big house. The spectators began to disperse.

Biggles drew a deep breath, and when he spoke his voice had acid in it. "The old game.

First, the velvet glove. If that fails, the iron fist. But it won't fail. Von Stalhein's a past-master at it. He went straight for Petroffsky's weakness—vanity; vanity and booze.

Whips wouldn't have made Petroffsky speak if he was sober and



realized what he was doing, but in his drink-sodden state he'll let von Stalhein wheedle out of him everything he knows. He'll tell him that we're here dressed as Koreans. He'll tell him we've got an aircraft, where it is, and all the rest of it. In short, he's going to turn our applegart upside-down."

"Why on earth did Algy let him come?" groaned Ginger.

"I don't suppose Algy knew anything about him coming, or he'd have stopped him. I'd say Petroffsky paid a call, and then went home and got a skillful of vodka. Under its influence he decided to find Mayne. He's an experienced hunter, and he'd have no difficulty in trailing us."

"Why didn't Bertie stop him?"

"I imagine he blundered past Bertie and Mayne in the dark. They might have heard him, but unless he spoke they wouldn't know who it was, and they'd sit tight—quite rightly.

But that doesn't matter now. Petroffsky's here, and in half an hour von Stalhein will know all he knows. Once von Stalhein is satisfied that he's sucked Petroffsky dry of information he'll waste no time getting after us. We've got to get our men out of this camp before von Stalhein can take action."

"We haven't a hope," declared Ginger bitterly. "I can't see Vale cutting through those bars inside a couple of hours."

"I'm afraid I'm bound to agree with you," replied Biggles slowly. "The alternative is to hold up von Stalhein for as long as possible. We can't be in two places at once so it means that we shall have to split. I'll go after von Stalhein. The rest of the gang will leave him alone until he's finished with Petroffsky, so keeping him where he is for a bit shouldn't be too difficult. You go and get our people out. It's now or never. You should be able to manage it. Get them out and make for Bertie and Mayne. I'll try to meet you there, but don't count on it, and don't wait for me. Push on as fast as you can to the machine. You've got to get to it before von Stalhein can send his Mongols there—unless, of course, I can prevent Petroffsky from telling him where the machine is hidden. Are you sure you can find your way back, via the lignite diggings, without me?" "I think so. I know the direction, anyway."

"Okay, then get going. I'll hold von Stalhein as long as I can to give you as good a start as possible."

"I'll do my best," promised Ginger, and turning away, keeping to the trees, made for the prisoners' quarters.

Biggles watched him until he was out of sight, and then, after a quick survey of the scene of the recent fracas, now deserted, he began to make his way towards the hut into which von Stalhein and his new friend had disappeared. A light had been switched on inside.

He walked straight towards it, for there was no time for a cautious approach. It would not take von Stalhein long to extract the information he needed, and if he, Biggles, arrived too late to prevent that, his effort would be wasted.

He reached the hut without meeting anyone, although people were still moving about not far away, and halted in the shadow of the wooden wall for a final reconnaissance of the vicinity. Seeing nothing to cause alarm he went on to the window. A peep revealed Petroff slumped in a chair talking volubly while von Stalhein, standing up, smiling, poured liquor into two glasses from a bottle. It was obvious that there was no time to lose.

The door was on the far side. Half a dozen steps took him to the end of the building. He looked round it, half afraid there might be a guard on duty. Evidently von Stalhein did not consider it necessary, for there was none. Biggles opened the door quietly and found himself in a narrow corridor. Light showed under two badly fitting doors, one near, the other at the end of the corridor. From the far one came a clatter of crocks as if a servant was washing up. He would, Biggles could only hope, stay there. He went to the nearest door, and with a hand on the knob paused to listen.

Von Stalhein was speaking, in a casual, inconsequential voice. "So my old friend Bigglesworth is here too, with Mayne? I was half expecting him, but he may be surprised to find me here. He's a great fellow for dropping in at unlikely places. I should be delighted to meet him again.

I've been looking forward for some time to another little chat."

Biggles felt for his automatic and quietly opened the door. "Good evening, von Stalhein,"

he said politely. "You know, I've been looking forward to the same thing. Please sit still.

Carry on. Don't let me disturb the party."

Without turning Biggles closed the door behind him, pulled out a chair and sat down.

## GINGER GOES ALONE

GINGER made his way back to the prisoners' quarters in a state bordering on dismay. He had got his orders, and he had not questioned them, but to have such a responsibility thrust upon him without the slightest warning set his brain racing at such a speed that he found it difficult to bring it under sufficient control to form a clear-cut plan of action. A dozen thoughts intruded at the same time, overlapping, jostling each other and allowing none to receive the attention it demanded—the sentries. . . the keys. . . the windows were barred . . . the prisoners had no shoes—and so on. Each presented a problem not easy to solve. He could not get Biggles out of his mind, either. How Biggles was going to delay von Stalhein long enough for the escape to be effected, was beyond him. Yet he had a suspicion that it was by such lightning decisions as this, by snatching at passing opportunities, that he so often out-manceuvred his opponents. One thing, however, was clear. Biggles must have thought the situation to be desperate or he would not have taken such appalling risks. Success and failure now hung in the balance. One slip, however small, would be

enough to turn the scales against them, when not only the scientists, but the whole expedition, would be lost.

Striking futile blows against the ever-tormenting mosquitoes he leaned for a moment against the trunk of a tree, eyes questing ceaselessly for signs of danger as he strove to recover his composure, to think clearly and decide on the best course to take. One factor, one difficulty, superseded all others. Footgear for the prisoners. To get the prisoners away without shoes on their feet would be hopeless. They would never survive the long march back to base. Their feet would be cut to ribbons by the rough ground and the harsh grasses before they had gone a mile. To get into the room where the shoes were kept without making a noise could only be accomplished by the use of the key. There could be no question of breaking open the door. Yet it seemed that the only way to get the keys was by tackling the sentries in whose custody they were—a project which, without raising a general alarm, seemed impossible. Whichever way the problem was tackled, as far as he could see the object could not be achieved without noise. He might keep the sentries quiet by threats, but only while he was with them. The moment he left them to release the prisoners they would certainly make enough noise to raise the entire camp . . .

unless. . .

The idea that took shape in his head did not arrive as a flash of inspiration. It began as a vague hope which, as he turned it over in his mind, crystallised slowly into a definite plan needing only nerve to carry it through. Nerve and bluff. Bluff—which he had once heard Biggles describe as man's best friend in a tight corner. But to put a big bluff over needed nerve, or no nerves at all—he was not sure which.

At first he thought that considering the amount of drinking that was going on in the camp there was a chance that the sentries might be drunk. But this was no more than a hope. The thing would be a lot easier if they were drunk. If they were sober, could he by any means induce them to get drunk? With his mind running on these lines it was natural that he should recall the fellow lying in the long grass, in a drunken stupor, with a case of vodka beside him, two bottles of which he had sampled to his undoing. If only the sentries could find the liquor it was a safe bet that they, too, would be unable to resist the temptation to sample it; having sampled it they would go on drinking while any remained, or until they were in the same state as the man who had fallen by the wayside.

How could he bring the two things together—the vodka and the sentries? Obviously, he would have to take the liquor to the sentries, or the sentries to the liquor.

At first he recoiled from the scheme as being too fantastic for serious contemplation; but thinking it over he perceived that the risks involved would be no greater than those that would arise if he tried to get the keys by any other ruse. After all, he pondered, he looked like a Korean. The sentries would take him for one, and they would not question him because they would assume him to be minus his tongue, and consequently unable to answer. It seemed a reasonable supposition that the men, who were probably bored with their job anyway, would be more interested in the vodka than the man who carried it. It was a gamble which, if it came off, might enable him not only to get the shoes, but save a long wait while the window bars were being removed.

Ginger realised that the longer he regarded the plan the more difficult would it appear, so, slightly breathless from excitement, he made his way to the patch of grass which the Mongolian had selected for his private orgy. Obviously, the first thing was to ascertain if he was still there. He was, snoring stertorously. What was even more important, the area within view revealed nothing to cause immediate alarm, so

he hoisted the case on his shoulder, and without any attempt at concealment marched briskly towards the guardhouse.

In the execution of his plan things did not go quite as he intended, and for a minute or two he was afraid that he had overreached himself. The trouble began when he almost walked into a sentry—the one, apparently, whose turn it was to patrol the wire. The encounter could not be avoided. They were too close for that. As they met, the sentry said something. Ginger, of course, had no idea of what the man actually said, but he supposed it to be a challenge. In the light of what happened next it was more likely, as Ginger then realised, that the man had simply asked if the bottles in the case were full. That he did not expect an answer, at least in so many words, was made evident by the way he reached for the case to satisfy himself on the point.

With scant ceremony he relieved Ginger of his load, and knocking the neck off a bottle against the cartridge chamber of his rifle with a practised hand, he took a good swig, smacked his lips and drank again.

Now this did not suit Ginger at all, for he was afraid that the man might keep the lot for his own use. It was not enough to have one sentry drunk. He wanted them all drunk, or his plan would fail. Wherefore he made noises of protest and tried to get the case back.

For his pains he got his face smacked, and a stream of vituperation. This caused him to release his hold on the case, which fell to the ground with a clank of glass. This familiar sound was something the remaining sentries understood, for they must have heard it, and the argument, the guard hut being no great distance' away. Anyhow, they were soon on the scene, and the result was never in doubt. They all had a swig, and one of the newcomers lost no time in knocking off another bottle. Ginger again made noises of protest, as he considered would be natural in the circumstances; but this time he got a blow that sent him staggering.

Secretly elated by his success he abandoned the case, and moaning plaintively, to the derisive jeers of the sentries he ran away—taking care to make for the direction of the guard hut. A thought that flashed through his mind was, no wonder von Stalhein had complained about the behaviour of these undisciplined ruffians. However, it suited him well enough that they saw nothing unusual in his retreat, or in the direction of it.

Reaching the guard hut door, which had been left open, he looked

back along the wire and saw the sentries coming, two of them carrying the case between them. Even as he watched them they put the case down in order to pass round another bottle. This made their intention plain, and it was with no small satisfaction that Ginger foresaw that it would not be long before most of the bottles were empty. He was particularly gratified by the success, so far, of his plan, because he had followed Biggles' precept of exploit-ing the enemy's weakness to his disadvantage. He had, moreover, utilised materials which the enemy himself had

provided.

He looked into the hut, a bare room furnished only with a rough bench and lighted by a single electric light bulb. A bunch of keys hung on a nail just inside the door. In a moment they were in his hand, although he realised that in their removal lay his greatest risk of discovery. The sentries were not drunk—yet. Should they miss the keys they might guess what had happened. At all events, they would certainly smell a rat, as the saying goes. But there was no

alternative. The keys were the most vital factor in the deadly game he was playing. The sentries were obviously returning to the hut, and once they were inside it would not be possible to get near the keys until they had drunk themselves unconscious; but that would take some time, more time than he could afford to waste, bearing in mind the situation in which Biggles had placed himself. Therefore he could only pray that the interest of the Mongolians would remain concentrated on their unexpected find the

exclusion of all else.

There was this about it, he thought swiftly, as he unlocked the gate that gave access to the prison enclosure, and closed it behind him: if after a few drinks the men did miss the keys they would hesitate to start a general alarm immediately for fear of bringing the wrath of their leaders on their heads for the drunken folly of allowing the keys to be

taken.

With his heart pounding and his breath coming fast from excitement, crouching low he sped across the enclosure to the nearest point of the hut. Reaching it he did not stop, but went on to the corner, from where he made a final reconnaissance of the guard room, some twenty yards away. The sentries were just going in. They did not close the

door behind them, as he hoped they would. For a few seconds he lingered, waiting for the shout that would announce the loss of the keys, for it was now that the discovery was most likely to be made. He could hear the sentries laughing and talking, hear the chink of glass as they took the bottles out of the case; but the sound he feared did not come. The tension passed and he relaxed, breathing more freely.

Well content with the way things were going he started to move towards the door of the prisoners' quarters with the intention of opening it forthwith; but half-way he changed his mind, deciding to approach it from the far end, which, being farther from the guard hut, would reduce the chances of his being seen by the sentries should they for any reason come out again. This move, moreover, would take him past the window on the bars of which Vale would still be working. He would, he thought, be able to stop him, confirm that all was well, and warn him that he was on his way to unlock the door. This, he saw, was a necessary precaution, as to suddenly walk in would be to invite being knocked on the head in the dark by the men he had come to rescue, who would naturally suppose him to be one of the sentries. He would unlock the shoe pantry, which he would also have to pass on the way, to save time later on.

Reaching this, he unlocked it, and with eyes and ears alert for danger crept on towards the window on which Vale was working—or should be working. Actually, at the moment he was not working; of that Ginger was sure, or from where he stood he would be able to hear the file biting into the iron. Was it possible, he wondered, that Vale had finished the job already? No, it was not possible, he decided. Then why had he stopped work? Had something gone wrong? Had the prisoners been moved? Or was Vale merely taking a rest from his labours? This last surmise seemed the most probable solution. Perplexed, and worried by doubts, Ginger waited for the filing to recommence.

He waited for perhaps five minutes. Not a sound came. He couldn't understand it. Surely, he thought, considering the circumstances Vale would not waste so much time unless there was a very good reason. If all was well he would go on working even though his fingers were worn to the bone.

Keeping flat against the wall he crept on until he was almost under the window, and then listened again. Not a sound came from inside. This, too, struck him as extraordinary.

Surely the men, with the prospect of escape before them, would be

talking, or at least whispering, among themselves? Why weren't they? Ginger's doubts turned to fears.

Something had gone wrong. He was certain of it now. He became aware of danger. He did not know what it was, or where, but it was there, close to him. He was sure of it; he sensed it, although for this he could find no logical explanation. It may have been the flickering of an age-old instinct, the instinct that wild animals have retained but men have almost lost, reawakened by nerves stretched to the limit. At any rate, he was conscious of it, and indecision took him in its grip. He looked around, eyes straining to probe the darkness, but still he could hear nothing, see nothing, to account for the dew of cold sweat that had formed on his forehead.

Another silent step took him under the window, close against the wall. Still nothing happened. Slowly his right hand went up, inch by inch, groping for the bottom bar—or rather, to ascertain if it was still there, for by now Vale should have removed it. It was there. And, moreover, there was not a mark on it. Withdrawing his hand he caught his breath when he realised what this meant. Vale hadn't even started work. Why? There could be only one answer to that. He had been prevented. By whom? How? When?

These were questions not so easily answered.

Ginger sank down, bewildered, fearful, trying to work the thing out. He felt sure that no alarm had been given, for if it had the sentries would have known about it, in which case they would hardly be behaving as they were behaving now. For the same reason he could not believe that any of the senior members of the gang had gone into the hut since the routine inspection. The keys had been where they were always kept, in the guard hut, so presumably the door of the prisoners' quarters was still locked. If an extra guard had been put inside why should the door be locked and the keys taken away? If a man had been put inside to watch the prisoners surely the light would have been left on? The place was in darkness. How could the prisoners be watched in the dark? No, decided Ginger. That was not the answer. It didn't make sense, as Biggles would say. If anything unusual was going on, if suspicions of an attempted escape had been aroused, the guards would be on the alert instead of getting drunk. He moistened his lips and struck at the mosquitoes impatiently.

One thing at least became clear to him. He would not solve the mystery by sitting where he was. Time was passing, and Biggles might be having difficulty in holding von Stalhein. He considered giving the



V-signal, and did in fact purse his lips to whistle; but he abandoned the idea because it seemed pointless. If Vale was there he would be at the window, of that there was no doubt whatever—unless, of course, he was being kept away from it by force. If someone was there to keep him away, reasoned Ginger, then the V-signal would merely betray his presence and his position to that person. In the end he decided that there was only one way of finding out exactly what had happened, or what was happening, in the silent building, and that was by going in. Towards the door, therefore, he made his way, moving swiftly now that his mind was made up. Action is always a relief after inaction.

Reaching the corner of the building, from which the guard hut again came into view, he looked across at it. Conditions there, he was relieved to note, were practically the same.

The only difference was, the door was now shut. He hoped it would remain so. The voices of the sentries were raised high, as if in argument, which was also to the good, for it suggested that they were still drinking. Staring at the closed door the thought occurred to him that it was in his power to keep the men inside, for a time, anyway; and even a short time, in view of what he was going to do, might be invaluable. If he could lock the door without making a noise the sentries would not know that they had been locked in until one of them tried to get out. And in view of the din which they themselves were making it seemed unlikely that they would hear the lock turn even if it did make a slight noise. It was, he thought, a chance worth taking, and he resolved to snatch it.

He looked around. Not a soul was in sight. Bending low he ran to the gate, opened it and went on to the door of the hut. Holding the keys tight to prevent them from jangling he found the right one, inserted it and turned it. The click that it made brought his heart into his mouth, as is said; but to his unspeakable relief the noise within continued without pause. He backed away for a few yards, and after closing the gate ran to the door of the prison hut. On the threshold he paused again for a second to survey the scene, but seeing nothing to worry him, with great caution he tried the door. As he expected, it was locked.

Again finding the right key he slipped it in and very slowly turned it. It moved easily, as he thought it would, the lock being in constant use. Putting the keys in his pocket he held his breath, turned the handle and opened the door an inch. He allowed the handle to return to its original position and then stood still, listening. Not a sound came from inside. He felt for his automatic, and with it in his left hand opened

the door another inch.

Nothing happened. The silence within was that of a sepulchre. The only sound he could hear was the pounding of his heart. Sweat, partly the result of the humid heat and partly due to the intense strain on his nerves, trickled down his nose. He drew a deep breath and again reached for the door. He pushed it. It creaked slightly as it moved. It came to rest.

The profound silence remained unbroken.

## HOT WORK IN COLD BLOOD

QUITE suddenly Ginger resolved that this intolerable suspense must come to an end. It was playing havoc with his nerves. Taking a firmer grip on his automatic, making no more noise than a cloud passing over the face of the moon, he stepped inside, took a swift pace to the left and crouched low, waiting for something to happen. Still not a sound broke the trance-like calm. Nothing moved, he thought, or he must have heard it. But the very absence of sound charged the air with a tense expectancy.

How to break it, for a moment or two he did not know. Then he remembered that the hut, like the rest, was fitted with electric light. He recalled, too, that an electric light switch is usually to be found just inside a door, on the side that swings open, to allow easy access to it. The idea of switching on the light horrified him, but he could think of nothing else to do. He would at least know the worst. He had to see. This staring into a blank wall of



*Ginger was not conscious of firing—*

darkness was not to be endured any longer. His left hand went out, groping for the switch. His questing fingers found it. They closed over the button. Edging away until he was at arm's length he held his breath, depressed the switch and jumped sideways.

Almost simultaneously with the click came the flash and crash of a firearm, and a bullet smashed into the woodwork just below the switch. In a split second he had fired back at a man, an elderly man,

who stood within three paces of him, a man who he realised must have been there all the time, unless he, too, had been creeping towards the switch.

Ginger, dazed by the sudden light and the roar of the explosion, was not conscious of firing, much less of taking aim. Moving under the impulse of self-preservation his automatic had seemed to jerk up and go off. Sparks leapt between him and the man. The man hardly moved. He seemed to be making a tremendous effort to raise again the revolver he was holding. It went off, to rip a long splinter out of the floor. Then he seemed to crumple at the legs. The revolver fell with a hollow thud. Coughing, the man slumped across it and lay still.

For several seconds Ginger could only stare with eyes round with horror, feeling sure that he had killed one of the men he had come to rescue. Then they went up, and he took in the scene at a glance. Only one thing interested him. In the background, paralysed it seemed by what had happened, stood a group of men—five of them, all bearded. They stared at him. He stared back.

With an effort he found his voice. "Which one of you is Vale?" he asked shakily.

One of the men stepped forward. "I'm Vale."

Ginger pointed at the man on the floor. "Who's this?" "We thought he was one of us, but he was a traitor. His

name was Luntz."

Ginger drew a deep breath. "Thank God," he said fervently. Then the full realisation of where he was and what he was doing swept over him. "Come on," he said tersely. "No time for talking now. Those shots will set things buzzing. Round to the pantry and get into your shoes. The door's unlocked. Look lively."

There was a swift move towards the door.

"What about the sentries?" asked Vale.

"They're locked in their hut," answered Ginger, thankful now that he had taken this precaution. "I'll take care of them if they get out. Get cracking."

The prisoners ran out.

Ginger went out last, switching off the light and closing the door behind him. He did not trouble to lock it. That the shots had been heard by the sentries was evident, for from within their hut came a clamour. One was beating on the door with what sounded like a rifle-butt. It did no good, for the hut was built of stout timber.

Ginger, with his nerves now under control, walked on to the angle of the prison hut, from where he could still watch the guardroom and at the same time be near his men.

Naturally, he was in a fever of impatience, for time now was everything. Minutes passed.

The uproar inside the guardroom continued, but as no one else had appeared on the scene he began to hope that the shots, muffled as they would be by the thick wooden walls of the building, had passed unnoticed. Still, he fidgeted in his anxiety to be away. The scientists seemed to be a long time finding their shoes and getting them on, although he made allowance for the fact that there was bound to be some confusion in the darkness.

He was still waiting, keeping watch, when three men appeared running along the outside of the wire, obviously bound for the guard hut. At first he decided that they must have heard the shots, but then, remembering what von Stalhein had said about doubling all guards, he thought that these might be the new men who, hearing the noise in the hut, were coming along at a run to see what was happening. They would not be able to get in, but even so those inside would soon tell them how they were fixed, and about the shots that had been fired. The newcomers would assume that the door of the prison hut was locked, with the keys in the guardroom; but that would not prevent them from coming in the enclosure to make sure. In any case, he dare wait no longer, so turning to where some of his men were standing, apparently ready to move off, he asked them if they were all set to travel.

Vale answered. "We're waiting for Major Cardwell," he reported.

"Who's he?"

"The American."

"What's the matter—can't he find his shoes?"

"Yes, he's got them on," replied Vale. "He's gone over to the workshop

for something."

"For what?" demanded Ginger angrily.

"I don't know—he didn't say."

Ginger swallowed hard, trying to control his impatience at this delay.  
"He must be crazy,

" he muttered. "He's risking the whole show. If he isn't here in ten seconds I'm going without him. A new bunch of guards has just arrived."

He ran back to the corner and peeped round; and he was not surprised to see the three new guards running across the enclosure towards the door of the prison hut—much too close to be comfortable. Without stopping they went inside. Again acting on the spur of the moment he dashed along, and just as the light was switched on reached the door. He caught a fleeting glimpse of the three Mongolians standing just inside regarding with flat, bovine faces, the man who had been shot. They saw him, too, but he moved first. He slammed the door, locked it, and leapt aside just as a bullet crashed through the woodwork. Flinging aside the now useless keys he tore back to the end of the hut just as Major Cardwell reappeared.

"Come on," he snapped. "You've kept everyone waiting;

"Sorry, son," replied the officer blandly.

"You will be if we're not soon out of this," retorted Ginger grimly, and taking the lead ran for the gap in the fence which Biggles had made on the occasion of their earlier visit.

He went on to the nearest trees for cover.

Now, haste to leave the camp did not mean that Ginger could leave it at any point. In order to get his bearings, in order to find the trail that led to the lignite workings, he would have to leave by the way he came in; otherwise, as he realised well enough, he would be hopelessly lost in the wilderness of marshes. The slave compound was, therefore, his first landmark. This would give him his direction, and towards it he now led the party. Knowing that guards would be on duty at the gate he kept well clear of it; but prompted by another idea, in the hope of causing as much mischief and confusion as possible, he paused long enough to cut a broad gap in the wire, which would, at least, he thought, give the wretched Koreans a chance to get clear if

they were so minded.

Knowing the country, they would have a fair chance of getting away. As a matter of detail, a number of them, roused possibly by the shots, were standing about. With an astonishment that can only be surmised they watched him cut the wire.

It took him some minutes to find the rough track that led to the lignite bed—or rather, to confirm that he was heading in that direction. Having satisfied himself that this was so he hurried on. In the gloom he could dimly see figures moving about, but for the most part they seemed to be as busy as he was, making for the area he had just left, attracted, no doubt, by the commotion now going on there.

Once clear of the camp he broke into a trot, a speed that he maintained for some distance; indeed, until some of his party, who could hardly be expected to be fit after what they had endured, began to straggle. He steadied the pace to a walk to allow them to catch up. It struck him as odd,

that after all that had happened, he had still only caught a brief glimpse of the faces of his companions. The only one that he could recognise was Vale.

All that they needed now, he mused, as he trudged on, was to find Biggles waiting for them beside the path. Not that he seriously expected this. It would not have occurred to Biggles that he, Ginger, could have succeeded in his task in less than an hour, which was roughly the time that had elapsed since they had parted company. It was far more likely that Biggles would still be holding up von Stalhein, supposing Vale to be busy sawing through his prison bars. Ginger hated the idea of leaving Biggles in the enemy camp; but his orders were clear, so there was nothing he could do about it.

After about three miles had been covered, and he could hear no sounds of pursuit, he called a halt to give the party a breather. He himself was deadly tired. The pause would, moreover, give Biggles a chance to overtake them. His greatest fear was that Biggles, before starting for home, would reconnoitre the prison, quarters to make sure that the scientists were away. Still, he reasoned, with what was going on in the camp it should not take him long to do that.

He took the opportunity of introducing himself to the rest of the party and then gave them an idea of the general situation. The news that a plane was waiting at no great distance to take them home, should, he

felt, be a tonic to help them over the rest of the march. As a matter of fact, justifiably, it must be admitted, he was feeling rather pleased with himself for the way he had managed to effect the escape of the prisoners in so short a time, by employing methods which were up to Biggles' own standards.

He turned to Vale. "By the way, who was that man I shot?" he inquired. "I'm still not quite clear as to who he was or why he was there. I couldn't understand why you weren't working with the file."

"His name was said to be Luntz," answered Vale. Luntz. Now that he was able to think the name rang a bell in Ginger's memory. Luntz was the man named by von Stalhein at the general meeting; but he could not remember in what connection.

"Luntz was a spy," explained Vale. "We didn't know it. He was put in with us as if he was a prisoner like the rest of us. That's what he told us. He said he was a Pole; a research chemist by profession. He had been kidnapped in Warsaw. We believed him, having no reason to doubt his story. It's an old trick, and when I realised it I could have kicked myself for not suspecting something of the sort. He was simply a stooge, to report everything we said and did. No doubt it was through him that poor Gorton was caught whilst trying to escape, and so lost his life. You need have no qualms about what you did.

Given the opportunity I would have shot the skunk myself. He had to reveal himself when I told everyone that you and your friends were here to get us away. I was just about to start work on the bottom bar when, with everyone agog with excitement, Luntz calmly covered me with a revolver and took the file away from me. He then stunned everyone by declaring who he really was. Even so, he was in rather an awkward position, because to give colour to his story he had lived with us, and was locked in with us every night. He couldn't get out any more than we could, so had you not come back he would have had to wait until the morning, when the door would have been unlocked in the usual way. No one else had a weapon of any sort, so there was nothing we could do. We were searched every night. So was Luntz, but the guards, of course, were in the know, and they left him his revolver."

"I wonder he didn't fire a shot, or kick up a row, to bring the guards in," murmured Ginger.

"I wondered that, too, but apparently he had a better idea—or thought he had. He knew you were coming back for us, because I had said so;



so what he did was drive us into a corner and then take up a position at the window to shoot you the moment you appeared.

Had he kicked up a row to bring the guards along you would have heard it, too, and kept clear. But that's only surmise. As a matter of fact his plan wouldn't have succeeded because I, too, was listening; and it was my intention, as soon as I heard you coming, to shout a warning. As it happened I didn't hear a sound. Did you come to the window?"

"I did," replied Ginger. "But by the time I got to it I had an uncomfortable feeling that something was wrong because I couldn't hear your file going. That was why I didn't show myself. I'd already got the key of the hut so I decided to come in through the door to find out what was happening. Lucky thing I did."

Vale resumed. "Luntz heard the door open. So did I, if it comes to that, but of course, I had no idea who it was.' It didn't occur to me that you might have got the key, so I waited for the light to come on. Luntz must have done the same. He wouldn't dare shoot until he knew who he was shooting at in case it turned out to be one of his friends making a surprise visit—as has happened on more than one occasion. Luntz was pretty quick on the trigger when you switched on, but it happened that you weren't where he expected to see you, and you got your shot in before he could shoot again. That's about all. You know the rest."

"I see," said Ginger thoughtfully: "Well, I suppose we'd better keep going. I was hoping Bigglesworth would overtake us. He's still in the camp somewhere. We were cutting things a bit fine at the finish." He turned to the American officer who had caused the delay at the crucial moment. "By the way," he went on, "I'm sorry I spoke sharply to you, but what on earth induced you to waste time going to the workshop? You nearly gave me a nervous breakdown. I'd had a pretty hectic night, one way and another."

The American smiled. "I thought I'd leave the rats a parting gift to remember us by—to teach them to think twice in future before manhandling an American citizen."

"Gift?" echoed Ginger. "What sort of gift?"

"Oh, just a little squib."

Ginger frowned. "Squib? What are you talking about? Please speak plainly because I'm in a hurry. I'm also very tired."

When the American answered his tone was serious. "There was stuff in that shed that must have been stolen from United States workshops—plans and specifications of some of our latest jobs. When I saw them I decided that it was my duty to destroy them at the first opportunity, even if it meant blotting myself out at the same time. I've been working on the idea. You see, I'm a high-explosive specialist, as well as an atomic engineer—

which is why they dragged me in, no doubt. To-night was the chance I've been waiting for, so I took it."

Ginger spoke slowly. "Do you mean—you put a bomb—in that hut?"

"And how, sonny."

Ginger's legs went weak, for he could imagine what sort of a bomb an atomic expert would make. "When is this bomb due to go off?" he asked in a strained voice.

"It isn't timed. It's wired to the electric circuit. The first guy to switch on the light in that workshop will never know what happened to him. Neither will anyone else near that enclosure. Why, what's wrong? Don't you like the idea?"

Ginger bit his lip. "I'd like it well enough, as a means of destroying the enemy's work, were it not for one thing," he answered wearily.

"What's that?"

"My chief is still in that camp. If I know him, he's quite likely to go to the prison enclosure to make sure that we got away before he leaves the camp himself."

There was a brief silence.

"Well now, I guess that's just too bad," said the American.

"There's no need to guess," muttered Ginger bitterly, sick at this new anxiety that had been thrust upon him. "It's worse than that."

"I wasn't to know," said the American contritely.

"Of course you weren't," agreed Ginger readily. "But that doesn't help matters. No doubt you acted for the best, but you might have told me what you were going to do, instead of—"

He got not further. From the direction of the camp a weird blue flame

leapt up, it seemed, to heaven itself, flooding the world with a ghastly glare that turned the faces of the escaped prisoners to chalk-white masks. As the glow faded the thunder of the explosion rolled across the sullen landscape.

"I guess that's it," said the American quietly.

## !JIGGLES PLAYS FOR TIME

WHEN Biggles made his dramatic entry into von Stalhein's room there was a silence that lasted for several seconds. Von Stalhein did not move. Imperturbable, and as immaculate as if he had been in the Wilhelmstrasse, from the cane chair in which he sat, a little to one side of a writing table, he regarded Biggles through eyes that were coldly hostile and gave the lie to the sardonic smile that twisted the corners of his thin-lipped mouth. A spiral of pale blue cigarette smoke coiled towards the ceiling from the cigarette held in its usual long holder. There was no indication of shock that must have resulted from Biggles' entrance. As for Petroffsky, he merely stared owlishly as if his befuddled faculties were unable to cope with the situation.

Von Stalhein spoke first. His voice was pitched low, but it was as sour as vinegar. Said he: "You know, Bigglesworth, you'll do this sort of thing once too often."

Biggles nodded slightly. "I think it's quite likely," he agreed. "But this, I hope, will not be the occasion." Actually, he had nothing to say, the object of his intrusion being merely to kill time, to keep von Stalhein in his room and prevent him from questioning the Russian.

At this juncture Petroffsky apparently recognised him, for he let out a howl of greeting. "

Have a drink," he invited thickly, reaching for the bottle that stood on the table.

"You'd be well advised to sit still and keep quiet," Biggles told him curtly.

The Cossack, looking abashed, sank back, blinking as he strove to grasp the purport of the words. "Wha's matter?" he demanded. "Thought we were all good friends together."

"You never made a bigger mistake," returned Biggles grimly. "Don't talk. Put a curb on your tongue and keep it still before these people take hold of it and pull it out."

"But me

" spluttered Petroffsky, looking outraged.

"I'm a tiger hunter "

"I know, but tiger hunting is child's play compared with the game you're playing now.

Sober up, man, and try to get this into your head. When this gentleman has finished with you what's left will be food for foxes. If you want to leave this place alive you'd better pull yourself together and get out while the going's good." Biggles turned sharply to von Stalhein who had edged a little nearer to his desk. "All right, that's enough of that," he snapped.

"Your nerve isn't what it used to be," sneered von Stalhein. "I was merely trying to reach a cigarette from the box on my desk."

"Go ahead," invited Biggles.

Smiling cynically, von Stalhein took a cigarette and fitted it carefully into his holder. "

Did you want to speak to me about something?" he inquired.

"Not particularly," Biggles told him frankly.

"In that case, as I have nothing to say to you, why not terminate an interview, which, as far as I'm concerned, is becoming tiresome."

"I can well believe it," replied Biggles evenly. "I'll decide when I've had enough of your company."

"And that's all you have to say?"

"All except that I see you're at your old games again." The German blew a smoke ring. "

And so, apparently, are you."

"It looks as if I shall have to be while people like you are on the loose," Biggles told him.

"But let us not waste time discussing what we are doing. We both know. On this occasion I've nothing against you, personally. As far as I'm concerned you can stay here until you fall apart from malaria; or if

the mosquitoes don't like the taste of you, until your precious associates decide that you've failed in your job, when, having no further use for you no doubt they'll dispose of you in their own fashion. That's your affair."

"Purely as a matter of detail, what's yours?"

"You should know. I'm going to remove from this unhealthy dump certain people who were brought here by force."

Von Stalhein exhaled slowly. "You may find that difficult."

"Most things I'm asked to do are difficult otherwise it's unlikely that I should be asked to do them," replied Biggles coldly.

"Aren't you getting rather tired of being given the runaround by a bunch of inefficient politicians?" sneered von Stalhein.

"They're not so inefficient that they can't keep people like you on the trot."

"Did you come here to tell me that?"

"No. I just drifted in to make sure that you don't hinder me from doing what I came here to do. To a lesser extent I aim to get this harmless hermit out of your camp with a tongue still in his mouth."

"You won't do that by sitting here."

"That," said Biggles smoothly, "remains to be seen."

"My batman is in the kitchen."

"I know it. Pray hard that he stays there, because if we're interrupted I may have to pull the trigger of this gun, which might easily be pointing in your direction."

"Why don't you pull it now?" scoffed von Stalhein. "Were I in your position I wouldn't hesitate."

"I can believe that," murmured Biggles. "Maybe that's why I don't. Call it vanity if you like, but I try to be different from people like you."

Petroffsky, who from his expression had been trying to collect his faculties, intervened. "

Gentlemen—gentlemen," he protested. "If this is a quarrel let it be settled in an honourable way. I will see fair play. How about a little drink?"

"Help yourself," invited Biggles. "It's likely to be your last. How much have you told this man?"

"Not a word," declared Petroff sky. "By St. Mark, not a word. I came here looking for my old friend Mayne. You said he was with you."

"He was," answered Biggles, "but he isn't here now." "What shall I do?"

"Go home and stay there."

The Russian looked pained. "What have I done?" he cried wonderingly.

"You've blundered into something from which you may not find it easy to get out,"

Biggles told him. "These are the men who flogged your Koreans and cut off your vodka supply. They'll be flogging you before you know where you are."

Petroffsky's eyes opened wide. "I fear no man!" he cried. "I am Alexis Petroffsky, Colonel of the Imperial Guard, the greatest killer of tigers "

"I know—I know," broke in Biggles impatiently. "You've told us that before. Pull yourself together and go home while you have the chance. I shan't be here much longer."

Von Stalhein spoke again. "Who is this man Mayne he keeps talking about?" he inquired.

"The name is new to me."

"I didn't come here to answer questions," replied Biggles. He smiled faintly. "But I'll answer that one if you'll answer one for me."

"Try it."

"Who's the big noise behind this racket?"

"I've often wondered that myself."

"Are you telling me you don't know?"

"I am. It's the top secret here."

"Then what's your angle?"

"Money. Besides, it's something to do until the next war starts. That goes for both of us, I imagine?"

Biggles shook his head sadly. "So you're still hoping to find yourself in a victory march? Forget it. You never will."

"Why not?"

"Because people like you will always be on the losing side, and if you haven't the wit to see why, it would be useless for me to tell you."

Von Stalhein's lips curled. "Are you trying to reform me with this righteous philosophy?"

"It isn't philosophy, it's a matter of common sense. But let it pass. I couldn't care less,"

said Biggles curtly.

Von Stalhein looked at his watch. "How much longer do I have to endure this?"

"Until the misguided Cossack has sobered up enough to start for home."

"I shall stay here," declared Petroffsky, who, as is so often the case with people recovering from the effects of alcohol, was getting aggressive.

"Please yourself," replied Biggles without emotion. "Remember, though, this is the crowd that flogged your Korean vodka carriers. When I go they'll flog you, too. I know I'

ve said that before, but this is the last time I shall warn you."

"Flog me?" Petroffsky looked shocked.

"Yes, you," answered Biggles, wondering how Zinger was getting on. For all this talk, from which he had little to gain, was merely to kill time, to give Zinger as long as possible to do his work and get clear. He had reckoned that this might take two hours, so he was prepared to remain where he was for some time yet, should nothing occur to prevent it.

Von Stalhein moved, quite casually, a little nearer to his writing table.

Biggles looked at him. "Listen, von Stalhein," he said quietly. "If you're trying to get to the gun which I suspect you keep in a drawer of that table, give up. I don't want to have to shoot you, but I shan't hesitate to do so if it becomes the alternative to you shooting me." He turned to Petroffsky. "Are you going home or are you going to stay here? Make up your mind. You came here bawling for Mayne. He isn't here, so try looking somewhere else. Your job is killing tigers. Trundle along and bag a brace for your old friend Mayne, just to show him that you can still do it."

"Yes!" cried the Cossack. "Yes, by St. Peter! That's right. I'm the greatest slayer of tigers

"

"Everyone knows it," asserted Biggles. "Go ahead and slay some more before you lose your reputation."

The Russian rose unsteadily to his feet and reached for the vodka bottle.

"Come—come, Colonel," murmured Biggles reproachfully. "Surely you're not going to abuse your host's hospitality?"

Petroffsky straightened himself. "As if I would do such a thing!" he cried haughtily. He walked stiffly to the door, turned and bowed low. "Good night, gentlemen," he said, and went out.

Without taking his eyes from von Stalhein Biggles lit a cigarette.

The German considered him stonily. "I'm beginning to find your company irksome," he complained icily.

"I can well believe it," acknowledged Biggles calmly, "but I'm afraid you'll have to suffer it for a little while longer. You'll appreciate that if I could choose my company you wouldn't be in it," he added.

Thereafter for some minutes they sat in silence, Biggles smoking as if nothing unusual was happening, von Stalhein slightly pale from vexation, his lips pressed together in a straight line. The camp seemed to have settled down, which suited Biggles well enough.

But presently came sounds which suggested that the situation in von Stalhein's room was drawing to its conclusion. First, muffled as if by distance, came two shots in quick succession followed by a third.



The muscles of von Stalhein's face relaxed in a sour smile. "Your Russian friend didn't get far," he conjectured.

Biggles thought there might be something in this. What he was more afraid of was that the shots had been fired on Ginger's account, for from the speed of the first two he felt sure that two weapons had been involved; and the Russian had no weapon; his rifle, which apparently he had forgotten, was leaning against the wall in the corner behind von Stalhein. At any rate, thought Biggles swiftly, Ginger would still be in the camp, for the simple reason that Vale could not yet have cut through the barred window. It looked, therefore, as if Ginger had been discovered. He could think of no other reason for the shots. However, his face remained expressionless.

But now, from some way off came a banging and bumping that puzzled him not a little.

He thought he could hear shouting, too. These noises soon mounted to what sounded unpleasantly like a hue and cry, but as no amount of conjecture would be likely to reveal the cause, Biggles could only sit still and await the explanation which, he was sure, would not long be withheld.

It arrived even sooner than he expected. From outside there came a rush of footsteps, and into the room, in a whirlwind of agitation, burst a pale-faced little man of middle age, dressed in dark civilian clothes, whose nationality might have been anything although he was almost certainly a European. Ignoring Biggles he leaned towards von Stalhein, and speaking in German, rapped out: "The prisoners have escaped! The hut is empty. Luntz is shot—dying." Then, appearing to notice Biggles for the first time he added sharply: "

Who is this?"

Biggles was already moving. He backed to the wall near the door. His pistol covered the newcomer but his eyes flashed frequently to von Stalhein. Speaking in the same language he said, in a hard voice: "Stand where you are and keep your hands where I can see them.

"

Expressions of surprise and consternation followed each other across the face of the new man. He looked from Biggles to von Stalhein, back to Biggles and again to von Stalhein.

"What is this?" he asked, wonderingly.

"I'll leave you to tell him, von Stalhein," put in Biggles crisply, moving to the door. He had already noted that the key was on the inside. With his left hand he took it out and put it in the outside. "Don't be in a hurry to follow me or you may meet a piece of metal coming the other way," he warned, and with that he slipped out, closed the door and turned the key. He caught a fleeting glimpse of a whiteaproned, moon-faced Mongol staring at him from the kitchen door, a tea tray held in both hands; but paying no attention to him he went out into the darkness.

He had but a vague idea of what he was going to do, being chiefly concerned until this juncture with getting clear of von Stalhein. All he knew was that the prisoners had escaped and that a man named Luntz had been shot. How Ginger had managed to get the prisoners out in so short a time—for he was quite sure that Ginger must have had a hand in it—he could not imagine. Not that it mattered how it had been done. The fact that they were away was all that concerned him now. He wondered how far they had got. Were they still somewhere in the camp?

That there had been shooting practically proved that Ginger was with them, for the scientists would not be likely to possess a weapon between them. Just when they had gone he had, of course, no means of knowing. The alarm had obviously been given.

Lights were on all over the place, and in the downcast rays he could see men moving about, Mongols chiefly, most of them hurrying in the direction of the prison hut enclosure. Their big brutal leader was with them, screaming orders. He also noticed a number of Koreans running about like frightened sheep; but these for the most part were making for the outskirts of the camp. One thing with another, it was not easy to determine exactly what was happening.

What Biggles really wanted to know was whether or not Ginger was still within the precincts of the camp. Deciding that there was only one way to find out he hurried on towards the centre of the excitement, feeling that with so many Koreans running about loose no particular attention would be paid to him. In the general uproar he would, he thought, be able to retire from the scene should that course become advisable.

Nevertheless, what he was doing was attended by a certain amount of danger, for an occasional shot was now being fired by the Mongolians at the Koreans, who were now streaming away from the camp in ever-increasing numbers. It was evident that the slaves had managed

somehow to get out of their compound and were making the most of the opportunity to get away.

While from one angle this was an advantage, in that it added to the general confusion, it raised this difficulty: Ginger himself was dressed as a Korean, so recognition would only be possible from close quarters. However, Biggles resolved to make a quick reconnaissance of the area round the prison hut, and if from this he could satisfy himself that the prisoners had got clean away, he, too, would leave the camp.

With this object in view, keeping as far as possible in the background, he worked his way towards the prison hut. Perceiving that, as most of the Mongolians were also converging on it it would not be prudent to approach from the front, he made his way to the wire in the rear and followed it along until he reached the gap which he himself had made. He now had the hut between him and the crowd that had assembled either in the front or inside the building—he was not sure which; so without running any great risks he dashed across to the window at which he had spoken to Vale. But before he got half-way, as the light was on inside, he saw something that amazed him—the silhouettes of the iron bars, which were obviously still intact. Stepping back a pace or two he saw that the bars of all the windows were still in place. How, then, had the prisoners got out? There could only be one answer to that. They had gone through the door. How this had been achieved he could not think—not that he wasted time trying. He glanced across at the big hut which Vale had said was the workshop. It was conveniently close so he dashed across to the back of it with the intention of making his way round the far end to the front, thinking that from there he would get a good view of the front of the prison hut, which might yield important information. Whether it did or not, he would then carry straight on and get out of the camp, having made a complete circle round the centre of it. If he saw nothing of Ginger it would be fairly safe to conclude that he had got clear.

He reached his objective without trouble, and looking round the end of the workshop saw a considerable number of people collected in the enclosure near the door of the prison hut. They were in two groups. There were Mongolians, dominated by their leader, who was apparently waiting for orders from a smaller number of Europeans who stood, apparently holding a conference, near at hand. Of Ginger or the scientists there was no sign, and as this was all Biggles wanted to know he began to back away, having no further reason to stay. Reaching the wire he paused for a moment to watch two men, two of the Europeans, who had detached themselves from the main party and were walking quickly towards the workshop. He wondered what they

were going to do. As they went in through the door he turned away towards the nearest trees; but before he had taken a dozen paces the world seemed to explode around him.

For several seconds, or it may have been minutes, he was conscious of the blinding flash only. Nothing more. With the roar filling his ears like a clap of thunder he was hurled by the blast for some distance before colliding violently with the ground. And there he lay, dazed, with the breath knocked out of his body, striving to get his brain under control.

His first really conscious impression was a terrifying one. He thought he had been blinded. He could see nothing beyond a blur of intense blue that spun before his eyes.

Nor, after the clatter of falling debris had died away, could he hear a sound. Over the camp—indeed, over the whole world—hung a deathly calm, as if all movement had been suspended. This reaction to the explosion, a common one, did not last long. When true consciousness slowly returned he found himself sitting up. Things around him began to take shape. His brain began to function normally and he realised that there had been a tremendous explosion; but even so, he was by no means certain of where it had occurred, or where he was. The scene had changed. When somewhat unsteadily, he stood up, he understood why. All the electric lights had gone out, as was only to be expected; but some slight illumination came from a patch of grass that had caught fire. The workshop had disappeared entirely. The prison hut was a flattened heap of timber.

The guard hut was leaning at a drunken angle. Some men were crawling out of it. Others were lying about. A few were sitting. One or two were standing, or backing away from the spot as if afraid that the explosion might be repeated.

It was now fairly evident that the explosion had occurred in the workshop, but how it had happened, or who had caused it he had, of course, no means of knowing. He could only hope that Ginger had not been inside—that he had not been responsible for it. Anyway, there seemed to be no point in remaining where he was so he started to move away with the intention of getting out of the camp while those in it were still under the spell of the disaster. Suddenly he became aware that something was missing. He had lost something; and it was several seconds before he could discover what it was. His pistol. He recalled that he had been carrying it in his hand when the explosion had occurred. It was not in his hand now, so he could only conclude

that it had been wrenched out of his hand by the blast or else he had dropped it when he had fallen. He spent a minute looking for it—or rather, groping about in the grass hoping to come upon it. But in this he was unsuccessful, and being disinclined to waste any more time decided that he would have to go without it.

Unfortunately, at this juncture, a number of Mongols who had been standing at a distance began moving towards him. Naturally, he altered his direction to avoid them. But when one of them shouted he knew that he had been noticed. All he could do was walk on, pretending that he had not heard. Ming, the Mongolian leader, now appeared on the scene, and he, too, shouted. Biggles, seeing that the situation was becoming serious, started to run, thinking that if he could reach some nearby trees he would be able to slip away. In attempting to do this he collided with a tangle of barbed wire fencing that had evidently been blown out of the ground by the explosion. He tripped and fell. Before he could extricate himself rough hands were laid on him and he was hauled to his feet to a barrage of abuse. For a moment or two he was afraid that he was going to be severely manhandled, for the men were in an ugly mood; and not having a weapon of any sort there was little he could do to prevent it. But by this time the affair had attracted the attention of a small party of Europeans who had just arrived, and they came nearer as if to ascertain what was going on. Biggles recognised von Stalhein before he himself was recognised, and tried to hide his face. But he was too late.

Von Stalhein took a quick pace forward, peering. "Ach so!" he said in a voice that revealed the extent of his satisfaction. "This is a pleasure."

"If it is," replied Biggles evenly, "it's all yours."

## BER TIE TAKES A TURN

MEANWHILE, following the explosion, Ginger, more than a little worried, had led his tired party on to the hide-out where Bertie and Mayne were waiting. Twice during the march they had been overtaken by escaping Koreans or Orochons. They had stood aside to let them pass. Otherwise, there had been no incident of any sort.

Bertie, of course, was delighted to see the party, for he assumed, naturally, that the expedition had been entirely successful; but his expression changed when Ginger expressed his fears for Biggles' safety. Bertie had heard the explosion, and, as he said, supposed it to have been caused by Biggles who had decided to liquidate the enemy

camp.

Ginger, sitting with his back to a tree while Bertie brewed tea, ran over his earlier adventures with Biggles,

and narrated his own from the time they had parted company. "If Petroffsky hasn't come this way then he must also be in the enemy camp somewhere," he concluded. "Of course, he may have stayed with Biggles, but I don't think that's likely. I'm pretty sure Biggles would try to get rid of him. The fellow was as drunk as an owl and would only be in the way. Biggles was pretty browned off with him when he left me."

"If Petroffsky was tight he might have lost himself in the beastly bogs," opined Bertie, handing out mugs of tea.

"Personally, I couldn't care less," asserted Ginger.

"The point is, old boy, what do we do next—if you get my meaning?" inquired Bertie. "

Do we wait here, or do we toddle along, or what do we do?"

"It isn't much use wasting time here if Biggles is in a jam back in the camp," answered Ginger. "I think somebody ought to go and see what's happened to him. I hoped he'd overtake us; and I think he would have done had he started soon after the explosion which must have made a mess of things and caused a general flap. If someone does go back the chances are that he'll meet Biggles, in which case so well and good. I'd go myself, but to tell the truth I'm dead on my feet. I don't think I could do it."

"What would Biggles say about it, I wonder?" murmured Bertie.

"I can tell you that right away," returned Ginger. "His orders were that the party was to make straight for the aircraft."

"Well, Mayne could take the crowd along. He knows the way," averred Bertie. "If you like I'll toddle back to the camp to see what's cooking there. I know the direction. I'm browned off with sitting here, having my hide perforated by mosquitoes, flies, ticks, beetles, and what have you. Let Mayne take the party to the aircraft. You curl up here and have a snooze. I'll go back. Biggles will find you if we miss each other in the dark.

How does that sound to

you?"

"I can't think of anything better," agreed Ginger. "Good enough; then let's get it organised," said Bertie. "Is the idea okay with you, Mayne?"

Mayne, who had been listening to the conversation, answered that it was. He could find his way back without difficulty. Moreover he could speak the local language should his party have trouble with the refugee slaves.

And so it was decided. Mayne set off with the scientists, saying that the others would find him waiting when they got back to the island.

Ginger gave Bertie directions for finding the lignite diggings, after which he should be able easily to follow the slave trail to the camp. "Keep on the track," he urged, as Bertie set off, "otherwise you may miss Biggles in the dark."

As soon as he was alone he stretched himself on the ground with a sigh of relief and settled down to wait.

Bertie trudged along quite happily towards the scene of the recent explosion. As he had remarked, after hanging about all day, a prey to the voracious insects, he was glad to have something to do. He met several Koreans, alone or in bands, but he took no notice of them. They ignored him, no doubt taking him to be one of themselves.

But when he had gone some distance he was not a little astonished to hear a man singing.

The sound came from ahead. He stopped to listen, and soon observed that the singer was coming towards him. What song the man sang he did not know, for the tune had a strange haunting lilt, and the words were in a language unknown to him.

haunting

that it was no tongueless Korean was evident.

Presently the singer could be seen in the soft moonlight and it was the fact that he swayed slightly as he walked that provided Bertie with a clue to his identity. Being concerned only with Biggles he had forgotten all about Petroffsky. Now, as the distance between them closed, the style of his dress was certain confirmation, for Biggles had described the man after their first meeting.

Bertie now made a blunder; at least, he thought so for a time. He revealed himself, thinking that the Russian might be able to tell him something about Biggles. He might even know his present whereabouts, for according to Ginger's narrative the two had recently been together.

"What-ho, old Muscovite warrior! " he hailed cheerfully.

Petroffsky's song ended abruptly. "Who speak?" he demanded suspiciously.

"A friend of Bigglesworth and your old pal Mayne," replied Bertie, still walking on.

"A friend of Bigglesworth is a friend of Alex Petroffsky," swore the Russian. "Have you any vodka?"

"Sorry, old boozer, not a tot," answered Bertie.

"If you were not a friend of Bigglesworth you would be no friend of mine for admitting such a thing," declared Petroffsky. "In this country a man who travels without vodka has forfeited his right to live."

"Absolutely," agreed Bertie, "absolutely. But tell me, my merry old toper, where is Bigglesworth?"

"Would I know that?" The Russian seemed surprised.

"But look here, I say, haven't you been with him?"

"Yes. But I have been asleep since then. I was awakened by thunder."

"You were awakened, old Cossack, by an explosion of no small dimensions," corrected Bertie. "Were you near it?"

"Who knows? I might have been. Who blew up what?" "That," answered Bertie, "is a long story, and I've no time to tell it now. So long."

"But wait! Where are you going?"

"To find Bigglesworth."

"I will come with you," declared Petroffsky.

"Don't trouble, old warbler. I can manage," said Bertie quickly, perceiving suddenly that his encounter was likely to have



embarrassing consequences.

"No—no. Back I must go," said the Russian. "I have just remembered, those sons of swine took my rifle, my favourite tiger slayer. I will not go without it."

"All right," agreed Bertie reluctantly. "But if you come with me, you know, you'll have to cut out the crooning. Tell me, where did you last see Bigglesworth?"

"In the house of a gentleman named von Stalhein. An amiable fellow, although your friend seemed to think he was a rascal; but at least he offered me hospitality."

"Ah! He toted the old vodka bottle, I suppose?"

"Freely."

"Don't flatter yourself that it was out of the goodness of his heart or because he admired your noble countenance," asserted Bertie. "Nor was it to tickle your palate, my jolly old shikaree. It was merely to lubricate your vocal system."

"Could a man be so base?" questioned Petroffsky, looking aghast.

"Von Stalhein's methods are so low that no one has yet got to the bottom of them—if you see what I mean?" declared Bertie cheerfully. "But how long is it since this display of conviviality occurred?"

The Russian shrugged. "A short time ago. Or perhaps a long time. I'm not altogether clear about it."

"Did you leave Bigglesworth there?"

"He sent me home," replied Petroffsky sadly. "I remember starting, but soon after something must have happened. Perhaps I fell asleep. Who knows? But does it matter?"

Let us go back. You shall find the gallant Bigglesworth and I will find my rifle."

"Good enough, old soaker," agreed Bertie, but without enthusiasm, for he had an uneasy suspicion that his companion was more likely to be a hindrance than a helper.

This became a conviction when, as they walked along, Petroffsky kept

up a running fire of talk in a voice so loud that anything like the cautious approach he had planned had to be abandoned. They met more Koreans and Orochons who, for the most part, darted into the rushes at the sight of them. Bertie observed that it looked as if all the slaves were out and running wild. Petroffsky professed complete indifference.

As they approached the precincts of the camp more signs of disorder became apparent.

At one place the dry grass was on fire, and while the flames bathed the scene in a lurid light a belt of drifting smoke made it difficult to see what was going on behind it. Men were there trying to extinguish the fire. They appeared mostly to be Mongols, although there were a few Koreans with them. A dead Korean was lying in the grass. Petroffsky said he must have been shot trying to escape. He pointed to von Stalhein's house. "My rifle is there. I shall fetch it," he

announced. "There is also, unless it has been removed, a bottle in which I am interested,"

he added softly.

"You take my tip and keep your elbow straight while we're in this joint," Bertie told him seriously as they strode towards the building.

The Russian walked straight in and Bertie followed. Fortunately perhaps for both of them the place had been abandoned. At all events they saw no one. Petroffsky uttered a cry of joy, and patted his rifle affectionately as he collected it from the corner in which it stood.

When he turned to the table, however, the bottle was not there, for Bertie had taken the opportunity of slipping it into his pocket. The Russian sighed his disappointment. "Who shall we put to death first?" he asked casually.

"What's the hurry?" inquired Bertie. "Do you have to shoot somebody?"

"It would be a good thing to do," replied Petroffsky seriously. "To kill a few men always discourages the others. Besides, these Bolsheviks laid hands on me—me, Alexis Petroffsky—and for that alone they deserve death."

"Now, you listen to me, my nimble Nimrod," said Bertie crisply. "If you're going to start off by pooping at people you'll get us both put to death. If you're going to indulge in a beastly orgy of wholesale

slaughter you push along and play by yourself. I came here to find Bigglesworth."

"Then let us find him first," suggested Petroffsky. "When we have done that we might have a little sport with the rifle. How's that?"

"All right, but wait till I'm out of the way," requested Bertie. "I shall save my cartridges until I need them."

"But this rogue who calls himself a prince is nothing but a common deserter," argued Petroffsky, as they left the building. "He should not be allowed to live."

"All I ask, my old sabre-rattler, is that you wait till I'm out of your line of fire," answered Bertie wearily. He walked on hoping that the Russian would now leave him; but in this he was disappointed. Petroffsky kept pace with him, telling him in a loud voice a lurid story of some Chinese deserters.

From a short distance they paused to watch the Mongols who were still striving to beat out the burning grass. No one appeared to notice them, so they walked on, with Bertie beginning to wonder if he was not wasting his time. In the darkness surrounding the fire he could see nothing. He had no idea of, the layout of the camp and, as he now realised, he hardly knew what he was looking for. It was unlikely that Biggles would be walking about the camp so the chances of meeting him seemed remote. Presently his companion called attention to a large building that loomed up before them, towards which they had been drawn by a lighted window.

"This is a place of importance," declared Petroffsky. "Let us burn it down. A good fire is what we need for accurate shooting."

Bertie did not answer. He stared at the building, wondering if by any chance this was the prison hut to which Ginger had referred. He was not to know that the prisoners' quarters had been demolished by the explosion; so, really, it was from lack of any definite plan that he walked on for a closer view. Petroffsky remained with him.

As they drew nearer Bertie suddenly caught his companion by the arm as from the open window came the sound of voices. "Go easy, old sharpshooter," he ordered. "What have we here?" Approaching warily, the first thing he saw was an oil lamp standing on a table.

This illuminated a scene that brought him to an abrupt halt. A sharp intake of breath expressed his astonishment, and perhaps dismay.

There were some seven or eight men in the room, one or two sitting, but most of them standing. In either case it was clear from their attitudes that a conference of importance was in progress, although there was nothing surprising about this considering the explosion and the effect of it on the camp. But the crux of the situation, Bertie thought, was a figure that sat a little apart from the others, for on him all eyes were turned. It was Biggles. Behind him, a revolver in one hand and his whip in the other, was the gigantic Mongol slavemaster, Ming. Von Stalhein was there, in the group, as was also the man who called himself Prince Ling Soo—at least, so Bertie assumed, from his comic-opera style of Oriental dress. He was speaking fiercely, punctuating his words with the eloquent waving of a formidable dagger. Bertie, of course, did not know what the man was saying, but he had a pretty good idea. If his gestures were an indication, he was advocating the immediate dispatch of the prisoner, the man responsible for the present state of affairs. From time to time one or two of the others present seemed to make some attempts to intervene, but without much success.

How Bertie, had he been alone, would have handled this situation, will never be known.

The same may be said of Biggles. Neither had any opportunity of putting into effect any plan that may have been made. Bertie, pistol in hand, was still watching Ling Soo, who was chattering like an enraged ape, when an explosion occurred so close to his head that he thought his ear drums were shattered. As a matter of detail he suffered from the effects of it for a week. Even so, he realised what had happened. Petroffsky had fired his rifle.

Ling Soo's words were cut off short and he crumpled like an empty sack. But even before his body had reached the ground a second shot caused the oil lamp to disintegrate in a shower of glass. The room was plunged into darkness, but from it came such a medley of sounds as might be expected to result from such a situation.

Bertie's first reaction was fury with the Russian for taking matters into his own hands.

But the thing was done, so no good purpose could be served by arguing about it now.

Ignoring Petroffsky, who was bellowing with what seemed to be singularly ill-timed glee, Bertie tried to get in through the window, only to be knocked backwards by a man who sprang out. Picking

himself up, not a little shaken, he saw that it was the big Mongolian. He fired at him from a sitting position, but missed. Ming was taking deliberate aim at him when Petroffsky's rifle came down on his head with a crack that stretched him flat on the ground. By this time others were pouring through the door of the house. Petroffsky, laughing, fired at them with such abandon that Bertie turned on him furiously, for he was afraid that one of these casual shots would hit Biggles. There was obviously a good chance of it. However, at this moment Biggles jumped through the window, and his arrival saved any further argument.

Bertie called to him, and would have left the crazy Russian to his own devices, for he was still keeping up a brisk fusillade on the door. Biggles shouted to him to stop it, telling him that it was time to go. Indeed, this was made the more imperative by flames leaping up inside the room, giving more light than was desirable. Moreover, several of the Mongolians who had been trying to put out the grass fire came running towards the scene, attracted by this new commotion.

Said Biggles, tersely, to Bertie: "Come on. Let's get out of this." He started to walk away.

Petroffsky, to Bertie's disappointment, followed them, although he sometimes stopped to fight a minor rearguard action on his own account, singing all the while in a rich baritone voice. However, presently he overtook them, and hailed Biggles joyfully. He had an idea.

There was bound to be vodka in the camp. It should not take them long to find it.

Biggles told him with scant ceremony that he could stay and drink himself to death if he liked, but he personally was going home.

Bertie silenced the bitter lamentations that broke from Petroffsky's lips at this decision by telling him that he had a bottle in his pocket, which he would give him presently if he would save his ammunition and keep quiet.

Thereafter, for a time, the Russian fell silent.

Biggles took the path that led to the lignite diggings and the others followed in single file.

From the rear, a crimson glow cast its reflection on the sky. As Bertie

observed, it looked as if the ambitious Prince had lost his palace as well as his life.

## THE BATTLE OF KOSSURI

BIGGLES and his small party marched on for some distance. It was not long before the garrulous Cossack, in spite of Bertie's warning, was talking and laughing again, and made such frequent requests for the promised bottle that it was at last given to him as the only possible means of keeping him quiet—at any rate, for a time.

No sounds of pursuit came from the direction of the enemy camp, but Biggles did not attempt to deceive himself. That a punitive expedition would be sent out after them, with orders to recapture or kill them was, he thought, a certainty, for not only had the conspirators lost all their prisoners—European and Asiatic—but the camp, with all the planning, the time and money that must have gone into its establishment, had been virtually destroyed. Ling Soo, the figurehead, and Ming, the slavemaster, had been seriously injured, if not killed. There must have been other casualties, too, for it had been one of the European executives who had switched on the light in the workshop, blowing it, and himself, to pieces. From these disasters the enemy would not easily recover, averred Biggles. Nor would they be likely to forgive those responsible.

As they walked along Biggles told Bertie how he had been captured. Bertie, in turn, narrated what he knew about the explosion and its cause—a matter in which Biggles was in complete ignorance.

From time to time furtive rustlings and sudden rushes near the track kept the travellers on the alert. It was realised that these noises were probably caused by escaping Koreans or Orochons, but even so, they represented a danger not to be ignored. The native refugees could not be blamed if, after what they had suffered, they took revenge on any Europeans who came their way. In the dark they would be unable to distinguish friend from foe. As Biggles remarked to Bertie, the whole district was now alive with escaping slaves, although what effect this would have on the situation was not clear. When daylight came Mayne and his party would be fairly safe because he could speak the language, and so explain matters to any ex-slaves whom they might encounter. Biggles, fortunately, was similarly placed, with Petroff sky.

The first sounds of pursuit did not occur for a long time, in fact, not until they were nearing the hide-out where they hoped to find Ginger waiting. But the sounds, once heard, approached swiftly. Hoofs

pounded in the soft mud; harness jingled, and the travellers had only just enough time to make themselves comfortable in the long grass beside the trail when a company of Mongolian horsemen galloped past in the pale moonlight. Where they were bound for and what they hoped to achieve by moving at such a rate was not evident, but, as Biggles observed when the danger had passed, apparently they had a definite objective in view; otherwise they would hardly be travelling at such a speed.

The little party went on, Petroffsky, now happy, singing softly what he said—when Biggles asked him to desist—was an old Persian love song. Presently, when more horsemen galloped past, it was only with difficulty that he was prevented from shooting at them. Under the influence of vodka it was obviously only a short step from love to hate.

Dawn was staining the eastern sky with pink when they came to Ginger's rendezvous. He was waiting for them, refreshed by some sleep but somewhat stiff from his exertions and from the nip of the sharp morning air. He had nothing to report, except what Biggles already knew, that a number of horsemen were somewhere ahead.

Apart from the fact that enemies were in front of them, in itself a cause for anxiety, Biggles began to wonder if Petroffsky, in his state of maudlin drunkenness, had told von Stalhein more than he admitted, or more than he himself was aware, in the short time they had been alone together in the German's quarters. If he had given away the position of their island base then the speed of the horsemen would be explained, and they could look for plenty of trouble ahead. He was afraid, too, that the riders might have overtaken Mayne and his party before they could get to the island. He questioned Petroffsky on the point, but the Russian insisted that he had said nothing about it. The truth of the matter, as Biggles realised, was this: Petroffsky had no clear recollection of what he had said because at the time his brain had been on fire with the pernicious vodka.

After a short rest and a cold, uninteresting meal, Biggles decided to push on, for the morning air was dank and chilly and there was nothing to be gained by remaining under the dripping trees with their swarms of ravenous insects. Petroffsky wanted to shoot something, in fur or feathers, light a fire and cook it; but Biggles would not hear of it. It was now daylight, and it was obvious to everyone—that is, everyone except Petroffsky—that the remainder of the journey would be attended by considerable danger. As Biggles remarked, it was not so much the mobile horsemen that they had to fear, as sentries who

might have been posted on high ground to keep watch over the broad marshes. Such men, if in fact they had been posted—although there was no particular reason for thinking they had—would at once see any movement on the open ground; and an exchange of shots would no doubt bring others to the spot. However, short of waiting for nightfall, a precaution which appealed to nobody, nothing could be done about this.

The risk would have to be taken.

So the march continued, the party of four moving in single file with Biggles leading, followed closely by Petroffsky, whose duty it was to indicate the best path and the whereabouts of pitfalls. Biggles told the Russian jokingly that if he made any more noise than was unavoidable he would shoot him without warning and throw him in the nearest bog; but there was, nevertheless, a note of firmness in the way Biggles spoke that caused Petroffsky to look hard at his face as if to determine whether this was really a joke or a serious threat. Anyhow, the words had the desired effect, and the inebriated Cossack settled down to a sullen silence.

About half the distance to the island was covered without any serious incident. Two small parties of riders were seen in the distance, too far away to cause them any concern.

A few Koreans were seen, too, and occasional flights of disturbed birds showed where others were probably moving or lying in hiding. A single gunshot far behind was heard without comment. But when, soon afterwards, there was a brisk burst of firing ahead, Biggles brought the party to a halt. The firing continued, as single irregular shots, with long or short intervals. There was, too, an occasional distant shout. It was possible only to surmise what was happening, but that it was one of two things seemed fairly certain.

Either the Mongolians were rounding up escaping Koreans, or they had overtaken Mayne and his party, who were defending themselves. Biggles thought the latter explanation most likely, for the runaway slaves, having no firearms, would soon have been silenced.

The sounds were too near, he thought, for Algy to be involved.

He turned to Petroffsky. "Where would you say those shots are coming from?" he inquired.

"Kossuri," was the answer, given without hesitation. "You mean the village where you live?"



"Where else?"

Biggles thought for a moment and looked at Ginger as more shots were fired. "It takes two sides to make a battle," he murmured.

"Which means that they've caught up with Mayne?" "I'd say so, definitely, were it not for one thing," replied Biggles, looking worried.

"What's that?"

"Mayne is the only member of his party who has a gun—that's what I can't understand.

From the volume of shooting it could hardly be one man against a crowd."

"I'll tell you what it is!" cried Petroffsky suddenly. "I understand such things, and I know the voice of my friends. Someone is shooting with my old Schneider rifle. I'd know its deep voice in a thousand. Besides, it fires a black powder cartridge. I should know, for I loaded them

myself with buckshot, for geese." He pointed. "Look! There is smoke—powder smoke.

Someone is shooting in my house, using my cartridges, curse them. By St. Mark!

"Just a minute," broke in Biggles. "Mayne knows your house—"

"Who better?"

"That's all I want to know," declared Biggles. "Mayne and his party have been overtaken.

They have found refuge in your house where they are now being attacked by Mongolians."

"Then it is time we were there," swore Petroffsky. "All the vodka I have is in that house.

If a bottle is broken

"

"Your old friend Mayne is there, too," reminded Biggles.

"I have not forgotten him," said Petroffsky loudly. "We shall fight side

by side. This is wonderful. Onward, comrades, to battle! Charge!"

"Not so fast," requested Biggles curtly. "If you want to charge you can charge by yourself. I like to see what I'm charging before I break into a canter. Besides, what about these pitfalls?"

The Russian stared. "By St. Peter! What a good thing you mentioned them. I'd forgotten them myself," he confessed.

"As you know where they are, and we shall have to hurry, would you mind going ahead to keep us clear of them?" invited Biggles.

"It is my plain duty," asserted Petroffsky. "Besides, it is my house that is being shot at—

and my vodka!" "Lead on," commanded Biggles.

"Forward!" cried Petroffsky, and striding on broke into a marching song.

"We can do without the music," muttered Biggles. "The enemy will see us soon enough."

The Russian shrugged his broad shoulders as if to deplore this dull form of warfare and went on. But before he had gone far he pulled up with a shout that set everyone looking wildly for the enemy. Ginger could see no one, - but he saw a saddled horse nearby, grazing. Looking at

Petroffsky for guidance he noticed that he was staring at something at his feet. Stepping forward he saw that the Mongolian rider had met a dreadful fate. He was at the bottom of a pitfall, impaled by stakes. How the horse had escaped was not clear. Ginger could only imagine that the horse had jibbed when it felt the ground giving under its feet, throwing its rider over its head. The man was so obviously dead that no time was wasted extracting him from what would undoubtedly become his grave.

The advance continued, and in some twenty minutes, a period of time during which the shooting persisted in a desultory manner, it became possible to see that Petra-sky's summing up of the situation had been correct. A film of smoke hung over the Russian's house. From it, and from other houses in the vicinity, shots were being fired. A Mongolian was crawling from one house to another.

Biggles surveyed the scene. "That's it," he said. "Mayne and his party

are in Petroffsky's house. We'll make that the objective. Spread out, everyone; keep in line and keep your heads down."

For a matter of a hundred yards or so, which brought the party to about the same distance from the objective, all went well. There was a lull in the shooting with no sign of the attackers or the attacked. Then Ginger spotted some horses tethered in a group of trees on his right front, and that at least told him who the attackers were. A moment later confirmation came when a swart Mongolian sprinted from one house to another, behind which he took cover. His interest was entirely on the house that was being attacked and he did not see the newcomers advancing on his flank. Ginger could have shot him, but he recoiled from the idea of shooting a man in the back, so he walked on slowly, through deep grass, waiting for Biggles, by an order or a signal, to indicate the next move.

As things fell out Biggles' decision was expedited by the enemy, who at this juncture made a direct assault on Petroffsky's abode. With a wild yell some Mongolians, numbering about a dozen, leapt up from where they had been biding and made a rush for the door, shooting as

they ran. Those inside fired an answering volley and two of the attackers fell; but the rest went on, and for a moment or two looked as if they might succeed in taking the building by storm. But this misuse of his property was apparently more than Petroffsky could stand. Before Biggles could give his orders, the Russian with a bellow of rage, charged, firing into the thick of a number of Mongolians who had reached the door and were trying to break it down. Biggles, with a shout of "Come on!" followed him, and Bertie and Ginger were not far behind.

It was a wild moment, but it ended sooner than might have been expected. The Mongolians had, of course, looked up on hearing Petroffsky's yell. Taken by surprise at this unexpected development, after a second or two of confusion they fled in disorder towards their horses.

But now a new and unsuspected factor took a hand in the proceedings. There was an outburst of shrill cries, and these came, it was quickly revealed, from a number of white-robed Koreans and half-clad Orochons who could now be seen flitting through the trees in which the horses had been tethered.

What had happened, or what was happening, was not clear—or so it seemed to Ginger.

One thing that became evident very soon, however, was that the ex-slaves were taking this opportunity to pay off old scores. There was very little shooting, which puzzled Ginger not a little at the time. Discussing the matter afterwards Biggles gave it as his opinion that a number of Orochons, accompanied by some Koreans, had made their way to the village and were biding in the outskirts when the Mongolians had appeared.

Having no firearms they took refuge in the jungle, where they would, no doubt, have preferred to remain hidden. From this sanctuary they had watched the battle being fought in the village. Some of them may have been stealing towards the horses with the object of using them to travel faster, but had been caught in their project when the Mongolians had unexpectedly bolted. The fact that there was so little shooting could be accounted for in this way: the Mongolians had emptied their weapons when storming the besieged house, and when forced to retire by Biggles' party they had not stopped to reload. Thus, they had been caught at a disadvantage which it did not take the natives long to discover.

Actually, Qinger did not see much of what happened inside the grove of trees, but what he did see gave him a good idea of what was going on there. So did the screams and yells that arose. He saw one Mongolian, caught in the act of mounting his horse, which he had managed to reach, dragged off and battered to death with cudgels.

Petroff sky, of course, had rushed into the mêlée, howling like a dervish. Then Ginger saw Biggles run into Petroftsky's house, so he went on after him, and arrived just as the door was being opened. Mayne appeared on the threshold, dishevelled but smiling.

Behind him, with a strange assortment of weapons in their hands, stood the scientists, against a background of tiger skins. Explanations were unnecessary, so the whole party stood ready for action while the fracas in the trees was fought to a conclusion. When, finally, the noise died away, and Ginger took a peep round the corner of the house, he saw Petroffsky walking towards them, singing. Seeing Ginger the Russian roared: "Ho there! The rats have fled!" He came on. "Now what about a little drink?" he suggested.

"Just a minute before you start tilting the tumbler," said Biggles. "What's happened outside?"

Petroffsky struck his chest. "Happened?" he echoed. "What only could have happened when Alexis Petroff sky entered the battle. The

Mongolian scum have fled the field —

those who had legs left to carry them. Those who could not run are being carved into small pieces by my Orochon allies. If you will be advised by me you won't go near them,

" added Petroffsky, with unusual earnestness. "The spectacle is not one for the eyes of a gentleman, although in my case it could not be avoided. But then, of course, having for so long lived here I am used to such things."

"Were any Koreans hurt?" asked Biggles.\_

"A few have cracked heads—but what is a cracked head to a Korean?" answered Petroffsky lightly. "Let us celebrate our victory!"

Biggles smiled. "Sorry, but I've no time for celebrations. We still have some way to go."

"A pity," said Petroff sky sadly. "Yes, a pity. I win a battle and meet my old friend Mayne—a double occasion for rejoicing. I must speak to Mayne."

They went inside, and while the Russian was embracing "his old friend Mayne", somewhat to his embarrassment, Biggles had a word with Vale and the scientists. "I'm sorry to rush you, gentlemen," he said, "but we're not out of the wood yet. A few more miles and we shall be comparatively safe. I shall also, I hope, be able to give you a respectable meal, which is not available here. Afterwards we shall have plenty of time for talking."

Mayne disengaged his arm from that of the Russian. "I'll come back one day and we'll do some more hunting together," he promised.

"So be it," answered Petroff sky philosophically.

Ginger could see that Biggles was really anxious to get away, realising what Petroff sky appeared to have overlooked—that more Mongolians might overtake them, in sufficient numbers to overwhelm them after all. Everyone was showing signs of fatigue, particularly the rescued men, and it was apparent that the party would not be able to travel very fast. In any case, for more reasons than one, they should be returned to civilisation as quickly as possible.

Biggles soon had everyone lined up outside the house ready for the last lap of the journey to the aircraft. Petroff sky walked with the

party to the outskirts of the village, where, with tears running down his face, he wished them farewell.

"Why don't you leave this miserable place and come with us?" suggested Mayne.

The Russian shook his head. "This is my home," he said simply. "Here I must stay, for I am a man without a country. One friend remains with me though," he went on huskily, taking a bottle from his pocket and patting it lovingly. "I shall drink to your good fortune, and your return. Farewell."

The last sight Ginger had of him was a lonely figure leaning on a rifle in the long grass, holding aloft a bottle in a parting toast. As he turned away a wave of sympathy surged through him for this strange, boastful but brave man, who, for reasons known only to himself, had elected to live his life in voluntary exile.

On arrival at the shore of the lake just off the island they found Algy waiting. He was not a little relieved to see them, for he had heard shooting in the distance and was afraid things had gone wrong. He transported the party, two at a time, to the island, where he had a meal ready. While this was being enjoyed by the rest he cleared the aircraft of its camouflage and made all ready to take off.

Biggles got up. "All right, gentlemen," he said, "if it's all the same to you we'll push along. The sooner we are away from here the better."

The party trooped into the big machine. Algy took off, and the lonely land of lakes and marshes dropped away astern.

Ginger, as tired as he had ever been, closed his eyes and slept, content in the knowledge that with their job well done, they were homeward bound.

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